

The HOUSE OF FEAR

ROBERT W
SERVICE



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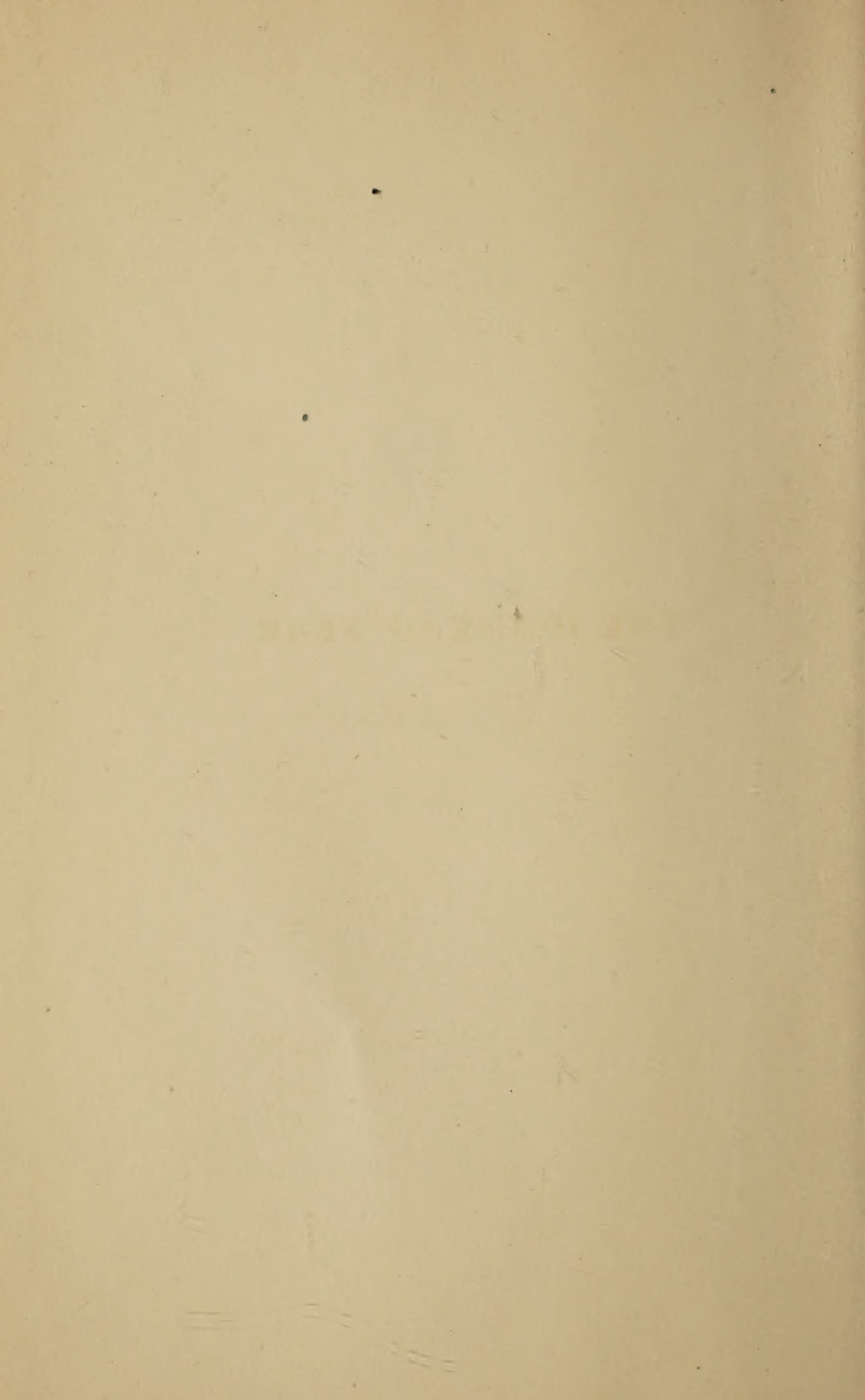
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THE HOUSE OF FEAR

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By ROBERT W. SERVICE

AUTHOR OF

"The Master of the Microbe," "The Poisoned
Paradise," "The Pretender," etc.



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TO MY MOTHER

WHO IN SPITE OF HER SEVENTY ODD YEARS

CAN STILL ENJOY

A TALE OF MYSTERY AND CRIME

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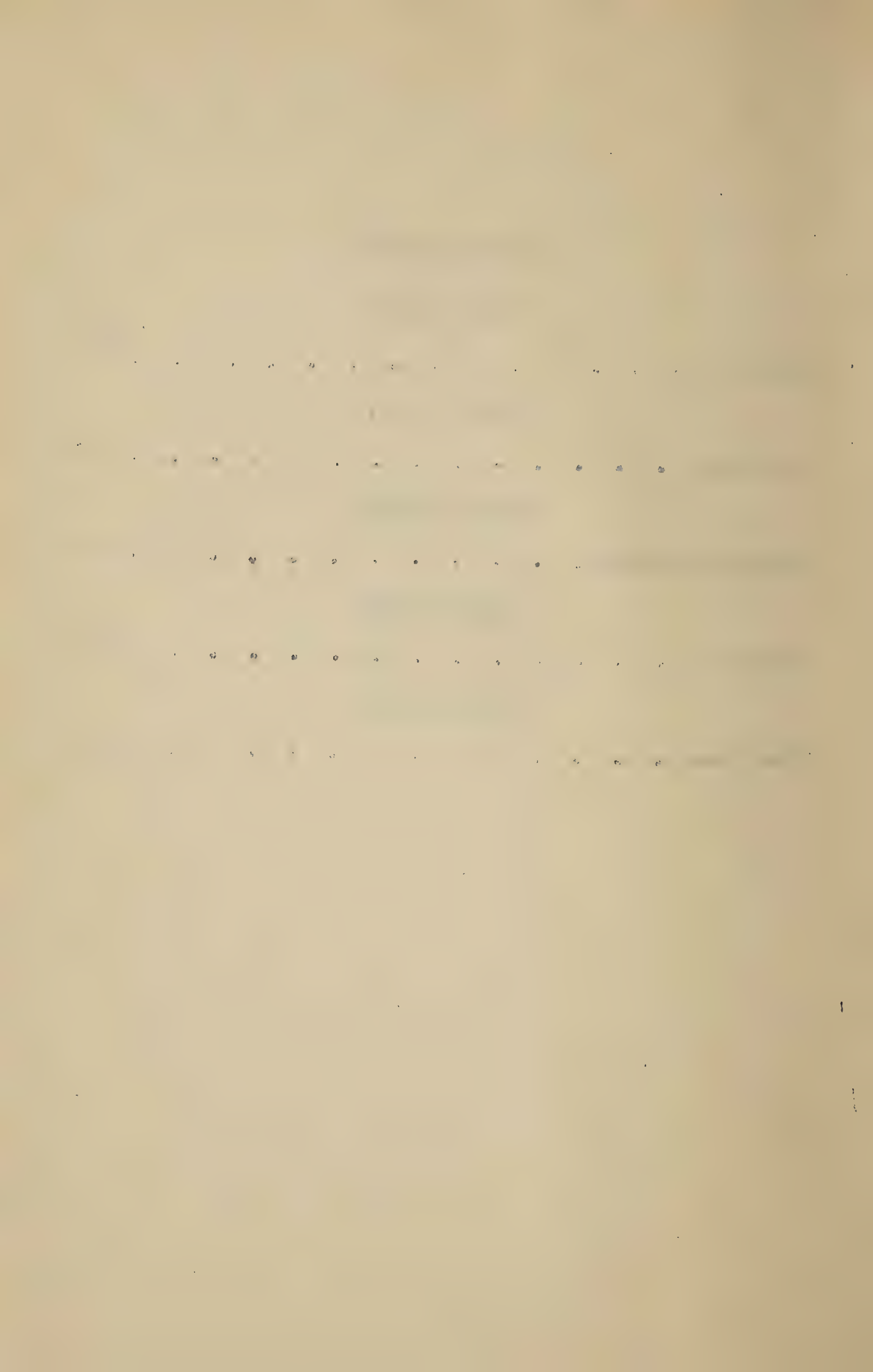
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BOOK ONE

PETER

CHAPTER ONE

ALPHONSE FINDS A FARE

—1—

The Hon. Peter MacBeth was drunk, ingloriously drunk. The time was daybreak; the place, Paris.

Down the glimmering Champs Élysées came a rake-hell taxi. In the dim leer of the dawn it was like a beast of prey, swift and silent; and the driver, muffled to the eyes, seemed also a predacious creature of the night. He was really a fattish young Jew named Alphonse Biscot.

Biscot saw a slender, grey-haired man teetering at the edge of the pavement and swerved alongside. Opposite the swaying figure he threw open the door invitingly and the Hon. Peter tumbled in. As he sprawled on the seat, his hat rolled to the floor.

Biscot got down to close the door. All that could be seen of his face between the brim of his cap and his woollen muffler were two beady eyes separated by the bridge of a broken nose. For a moment he stood looking at his fare who was too helpless to pick up the fallen hat.

"Where shall I go?" demanded Biscot.

"Go to hell," said the Hon. Peter.

"*Bien*, Monsieur; but what address?"

The Hon. Peter seemed to have a gleam of understanding.

"Any damned address. Just leave me 'lone. I wanna sleep . . . I say! Look here, Alphonse . . ."

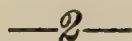
Biscot started. How did this devil of an Englishman know his name? As a matter of fact the Hon. Peter had once engaged a French chauffeur called Alphonse and now called them all by that name. But the next moment Biscot bent forward and his gleaming eyes seemed to narrow to

pin points. For his client, after much fumbling, drew forth a bundle, and that bundle was a huge wad of French bank-notes.

The Hon. Peter peeled off the first bill and handed it to Biscot. It was a fifty, but it might as well have been five hundred.—“There! Carry on going till you work that off.”—Then, having stuffed away his bundle, he promptly subsided.

Very thoughtfully Biscot went back to his seat. As he lit a cigarette his eyes had a dazed look.

“*Bigre de bigre!*” he muttered.



This happened about half way down the Champs Élysées. Biscot turned his car up the avenue, swinging round the Arc de Triomphe. Then he darted down to the Bois. There was a tense eagerness in the way he drove.

In the early dawn the Bois de Boulogne has an evil reputation. By night, of course, it is full of danger. It is so vast, so intricate. Off the main avenues are romantic roads, left mainly to solitude-seeking lovers. It was down one of the remotest of these that Biscot now sped, his mind a tumult of exultant thought.

“What luck!” he breathed. “What a chance! The little Englishman must be crazy. But no, he is only very, very drunk. The imbecile! To show a roll as big as my head. *Milles*, five hundreds, hundreds, all muddled up as if the amounts didn’t matter. The mean swine! He only gave me fifty. Must be over five thousand in that bunch. . . . More. . . . At least ten. . . . May be twice that,—a fortune! The man must be a multi-millionaire. He has no respect for money, the dog. He shoved that wad back as if it was a dirty handkerchief. Well, it’ll soon be in the pocket of one who needs it more than he does.”

With that the imagination of Monsieur Biscot took a

very pleasant flight. This fortune—it had now grown to thirty-thousand—would take him and his little mistress Bichette to the Côte d’Azur. They would do the swell for a time, Nice, Monte Carlo, perhaps win another fortune. Who knows! Luck seemed turning his way. He wouldn’t let the gang in on this. Oh no. It was his affair. No one should know, not even Bichette.

He cast a rapid glance round. The Englishman was snoring, his head thrown back, his mouth open. He wore an old Army waterproof. His face was purple and congested, and saliva ran down his chin. A bestial sight. Biscot felt virtuous by comparison.

It would be so easy getting that money. He would pretend to prop the man up on the seat, and slip his hand inside the coat. When he had collared the cash, he would tip his fare out of the door and sail off serenely. No violence. Biscot just loathed violence.

So he slowed down very gently, and almost imperceptibly came to a stop. It all happened as he planned, only . . . just as his hand was closing over the precious bundle, he received a ferocious punch on the jaw. Staggering back he saw two mild blue eyes staring at him wonderingly from that red face.

“Whatha’ devil you doin’?”

“I was just trying to lift Monsieur up,” murmured Biscot; “Monsieur was falling.”

“Don’ mind me. I’m allri’. ’Scuse me bein’ so rough. Nerves all gonna hell. Easily startled. Used to be amateur light weight champion. Hit too hard. . . . Keep agoin’. Makes me sleep.”

With that he dozed again, and Biscot returned to his seat, muttering:

“He does hit hard, the beast! Well, next time I’ll be more careful.”

He drove quite quietly for a little, then circled to the same spot. On his round he had not encountered a soul.

It seemed as if the Bois was utterly empty. Again, in this lonely alley overshadowed by trees, he slowed to a standstill. This time he let a few minutes pass before descending. His fare slept as profoundly as if the car were still running. Very softly Biscot opened the door.

He bent over the sprawling form. Once more his fingers groped inside that stained trench coat, then suddenly he gave a gasp. Two nervous hands were clutching his fat throat.

"What the devil you want now?" snarled his client. Biscot released himself, rubbing his neck ruefully.

"Nothing, I just wanted to tell Monsieur I've driven him the worth of the bill he gave me."

"Tha's allri', Alphonse. You want more money. Good. Money's nothing to me."

Once more he drew forth that preposterous roll and peeled off the first note. It happened to be a hundred this time. Biscot took it almost disdainfully. It seemed as if he was being given what really belonged to him.

"There! That ought to hold you for a while. Drive on, and next time you stop, stop at a fount of Bacchus. Understan'?"

Gritting his teeth, Biscot went back to his place. He was roused now. What a brute the Englishman was! If he did not know enough to get robbed like a gentleman Biscot would show him. There was another way. . . . The chauffeur groped in the tool box under the seat till his fat fingers gripped a heavy wrench. A tap on the head would do the job.

For the third time he circled round and was slowing down in the solitary alley when a sharp curse escaped him. Two policemen on bicycles were riding towards him; so, instead of stopping, Biscot stepped on his gas pedal and the swift car shot forward. When they got near enough one of the patrolmen signalled him to draw up, but Biscot did not seem to see. Looking back, however, he noted that they had dis-

mounted and that one of them was taking down his number.

Biscot laughed. In a hiding place in his garage he had half a dozen number plates all different. Much good would that do the *flics*! But it was a nuisance. Other five minutes and the job would have been done. Good thing he hadn't stopped. The police had his picture at Headquarters. True, he had done nothing this time; but they would have detained him and his prey would have escaped.

Well, it was too late now to try and bring off the *coup* alone. The Bois was waking up. He kept meeting people, more and more of them. Besides, he might encounter those policemen again. No, he must clear out. This must be a job for the Gang after all.

CHAPTER TWO

AT THE SIGN OF THE RED RAT

The taxi was threading a maze of grubby streets. On either hand were shabby workshops, sordid hotels, scabrous tenements. A bit of the true Paris the tourist never sees.

In the grey, greasy morning it all looked very disheartening, and even the Hon. Peter was conscious of it.

"Chap's taking me into a bally slum," he muttered. Then he hammered hard on the front window.

"Hi, Alphonse! Stop the bus. I want to get out. Got to have a drink."

But Biscot, whose faculties had a habit of failing him at convenient moments, did not seem to hear. He only drove faster, so that in no time they had traversed the wilds of St. Ouen, Batignolles, La Villette. Then he darted through his own quarter of Belleville, and swinging into an *impasse* of age-corroded houses, he gained a leprous-looking court-

yard. There he drew up, to be at once confronted by his irate fare.

"What the devil d'ye mean by not stopping? What sort of a dump is this you've brought me to?"

"One drinks well at the Père Pinard's," said Biscot pointing. Above a dingy door hung a board on which was painted a red rodent with the lettering:

AU RAT ROUGE

The Hon. Peter made a grimace. He would have preferred a snug bar just off the boulevards. However, any port in a storm.

"If there's liquor lead me to it, Alphonse," he said, slapping the fat young man on the back. Biscot winced. Verily this skinny red devil was heavy of hand. He had had enough of that rough stuff.

The door and window of the café were curtained, and Biscot, after peeping inside, entered cautiously. To the left, behind a long zinc counter was a man with a huge paunch, a face studded with fiery pimples, and a fringe of dirtyish grey hair.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Biscot."

"*Bonjour*, Père Pinard. I've brought you an early customer."

The Père Pinard bowed.

"I am honoured, Monsieur."

The Hon. Peter leaned heavily against the bar. In his gaunt ribs his heart was pounding, so that his lean frame shook from head to foot.

"Feeling jumpy," he told himself. "Can't have a drink too soon."

Then aloud: "Hurry, Père Pinard. Some of your best."

Opposite the bar were iron tables and chairs; but beyond, the café opened out to a dance hall. At a table two men were sitting; one unusually corpulent, with a blonde, infan-

tile face; the other a wizened snip, with sallow complexion, lank jaws, eyes like a rat. They wore overalls and canvas shoes. Biscot shook hands.

"*Bonjour, Gros Bébé,*" he addressed the big one; then to the other:

"*Ça va, Jojo?*"

With cigarettes dangling from their lips the two nodded. Without moving a muscle of their faces their hard eyes indicated the Hon. Peter inquiringly.

"A *type* I picked up," whispered Biscot. "Soaked to the gills. Got a wad a rabbit couldn't jump over. But halves for mine," he concluded whiningly.

Gros Bébé made a level movement of the hand which might have meant anything. The eyes of the two were riveted on the unconscious Peter.

"Where's Ear of a Dog?" demanded Biscot.

Jojo made a backward movement of his head, and at the same moment a man came from the rear of the café. Of medium height and graceful build, he had a dark Italian face with surprisingly straight features. Even his mouth was set in a line, and, as if his lips were stiff, he scarcely opened it when he spoke.

"*B'jour, Biscot,*" he said with curt contempt.

George Routis, known as "Ear of a Dog" was one of the handsomest devils of the underworld. He knew how to exploit his physical charms, and might have lived in the lap of luxury had not a love of adventure made him choose the life of a crook to the life of a bully. He wore his hair long to conceal what was his one defect.

A few months before he was born his mother, the wife of a Corsican inn-keeper, was bitten by a dog. No evil effect followed, but the shock and fear was such that when the child came, it was found that the lobe of his ear was a dull mouse colour and covered with silky hair. His father wanted to have the blemish removed, but his mother shrank from the operation. So the boy grew up, his good looks all

the more remarkable because of his unsightly blemish. "Ear of a Dog" his comrades named him at school, and the name followed him through a criminal career in Marseilles. But no one dared to call him so to his face. The boldest of the underworld respected him for his deadly calm, the sneering menace of his gaze. The lobe of his ear had grown long and pendulous. Even his thick hair could not hide it; yet to appear even to notice it was to kindle a fierce light in the man's eyes.

Like the others, Ear of a Dog wore cord-soled shoes; yet he dressed more carefully, and it was plain that they looked on him as a leader. From Biscot his gaze darted to the Hon. Peter, who at that moment turned round.

"Come on, Alphonse," he hailed. "Call up your friends. I'm standing drinks for the crowd. Père Pinard, two bottles of Champagne. In tumblers. Take it out of that."

Once more he lugged out his untidy wad of bank notes and pulled off a hundred. The five were standing round him but only Biscot betrayed emotion. The Père Pinard was suddenly abstracted. Jojo's eyes widened, those of Gros Bébé contracted, while Ear of a Dog never moved a muscle.

The Père Pinard filled five glasses; then into one he quickly added something from a small bottle. The Hon. Peter's head was lowered at that moment. He was feeling deathly sick, his heart thumping like a wild thing. He had to cling to the edge of the counter to save himself from falling. He took up the glass that was handed to him, stared at it thoughtfully, then dashed it to the floor.

"No, changed my mind. Don't want that stuff. Give me brandy. Here! Some of that there."

He pointed to a bottle of cognac on the shelf behind, and watched eagerly while the Père Pinard poured it. Then, bending over, he drained the glass without lifting it.

"Ha! That's better. Another . . ."

He cupped the fresh glass in his hands, his head lowered

over it. That was the time Ear of a Dog chose to strike. From an inner pocket he drew an object about nine inches long. It was really a piece of heavy rubber and, for a moment, Ear of a Dog balanced it in his hand. He knew exactly where and how hard to strike. Peter's head was lowered as if to receive the blow. In another moment he would have collapsed like a stunned ox when . . . Ear of a Dog suddenly thrust the thing out of sight.

"L'Irlandaise!" he muttered.

All turned, except Peter. A girl was crossing the dance hall. She was dressed in a deep black, which made the pallor of her face more remarkable. It was a clear pallor with a certain luminous quality and was lit up with splendid dark eyes. But her cheeks were hollowed and there was a hopeless set to her lips. Without regarding the group she passed out.

Gros Bébé clenched his fat fists as if exasperated; Jojo spat disgustedly; Père Pinard shrugged his shoulders, but Ear of a Dog tightened his thin lips. As if in a stupor, the Hon. Peter was still bowed over his brandy. Again Ear of a Dog felt for his weapon. A cunning tap and they would have this drunken fool down and out. Then Biscot would dump him on the fortifications till he recovered. Now for it. . . .

But with a curse this time Ear of a Dog again thrust back his weapon. For the door opened and two men entered. Both were tall and strong; but while one was stout and fair, the other was thin and dark. Each, however, had the same hawklike features and keen, steely eyes. With their fearless manner and a certain air of ruthless assurance they might have passed for excellent bandits. As it happened, though, they were on the side of the law.

"*Bonjour, Patron,*" hailed the stout fellow.

Père Pinard's manner changed. It became almost fawning.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Bouchon. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing, this time. But we've our eyes on you. Give us a drink of your best."

The old man hurried to obey. Biscot had oozed away. The three others, clutching their glasses, retreated to a table. The eyes of Gros Bébé and Jojo smouldered sullenly, but those of Ear of a Dog were opaque. The newcomers looked at them keenly, then at their intended victim.

"Who've you got here?" demanded Inspector Bouchon roughly. The Père Pinard shrugged his shoulders.—"A swell. Came in a taxi for an early drink."

The dark man put his hand on Peter's shoulder and roused him from his stupor.

"Come, my friend; better finish your glass and go home."

Peter drew himself up and looked at the man.

"Who the devil are you?"

The detective threw open his coat, showing a badge.

"Agent of the Sureté. This is no place for you, Monsieur. Better get out."

The Hon. Peter seemed to realize. He drained his glass, then like a man roused from an ugly dream he marched out of the place.

"I believe you fellows were after something," said Inspector Bouchon truculently. But Jojo and Gros Bébé shook their heads innocently, while Ear of a Dog sneered.

"Well, we'll see him safely away, and don't any of you try to follow." With that, the two drained their glasses and without paying for them went out.

"Good job you didn't smash his *boule*," said the Père Pinard reflectively. "We'd have been in the soup, wouldn't we? My little Georges, you're too impulsive. Coming it a bit strong isn't it to tap a *type* in broad daylight. Besides I've the reputation of the place to think of."

Then, Ear of a Dog showed unwonted passion.

"Stow your gab, old fool," he snarled, "as for that *soulard* I'll get him yet."

CHAPTER THREE

THE GIRL IN THE BLACK BÉRET

It was a curiously beastly day—slimy pavements, sullen rain, a saturnine sky.

In his old trench overcoat the Hon. Peter drifted from café to café, becoming more and more cheerful in the process. A fine rain fell with melancholy persistence, making the pavements slimy and the streets more and more forlorn. This raw damp affected his heart, causing it to thump violently, with moments of arrest that made him gasp and clutch at something. It was a tyrant, that heart of his, yet liquor usually calmed it. Drink was the doorway by which he could escape from his heart. So he kept on drinking.

About noon he went into a Chartier restaurant and ordered the best the smudgy bill of fare could offer. For a while he messed among bad food, but an excellent Beaune and a Benedictine consoled him. The bill only came to ten francs. He gave the weary waitress twenty francs for herself.

"I always tip twice as much as the bill," he explained, leaving her immobilized by amazement.

Once more into the sorry streets, but the fire of alcohol was now burning cheerily within him. Should he return to his cosy apartment in the rue Byron and the reproachful solicitude of the Admirable James? But no. He remembered his valet had gone to London for the car. There would be no one to receive him. Everything would be in a devil of a mess. Should he take a room at the Ritz? But untidy and in the middle of a debauch he could not face the rectitude of the Ritz. Well, what should he do?

As he stood at the edge of the pavement trying to decide, he saw a funeral coming down the street.

It was not an ordinary funeral:—a chariot covered with

flowers and bead wreaths: "*A ma Tante*," "*A ma Soeur*," etc.; a half-dozen chief mourners bearing a strong family resemblance, clad in hastily procured black, red-eyed, visibly distressed; a dozen cousins and near relatives, some in near black, very serious and conscious of responsibility; a score of distant relatives trying to show a decent solemnity; then half a hundred acquaintances mostly women, sedate in the front ranks but tailing off into cheerful irresponsibility—it was not the stereotype French funeral at all. It was just a shabby hearse and a shabby horse, and the cheapest of pine coffins covered by a dingy cloth. The driver sagged dejectedly on his seat, while without a single mourner the wheels splashed dispiritedly through the mud.

"Poor beggar!" thought the Hon. Peter fixing it with his monocle. "Damned rotten to go off like that. Not a pal to follow him. Or may be it's a 'her.' Anyway there's no one to care. Tough luck. I'd hate to be put away without a soul to mourn me—though, God knows, there won't be many. By Gad! I've half a mind . . ."

He was just in that state of befuddlement that is given to sentimental impulse.

"Never shall it be said," he decided, "that no one paid the last tribute of respect to this poor creature. I, at least, shall follow his coffin to the grave."

So he fell in behind the lugubrious vehicle and marched solemnly; yet even as he did so he was aware that someone had joined him.

It was a girl, he saw, though she kept well in the rear. A working class girl, she seemed, probably a friend of the dead. He rather resented her. He was sorry now he had so rashly undertaken this part, but felt that it would be unsporting to drop out. So he plodded on, down one grim street after another, with overhead a sodden sky and underfoot a plaster of mud. And so on to one of the gates. Beyond the City of the Living lay the City of the Dead, a huge, bleak burial

ground of the poor. The rain had ceased and in the west the sky gleamed pallidly. The rain-wet alleys glistened, damp tombstones glimmered. Then they passed through the crowded streets of the City and came to its suburbs where the graves ceased. Here, yawning muddily, was the one to which their dead was assigned. Without taking any notice of them the coachman crawled rheumatically from his perch and with the help of a grave digger unceremoniously slid the unpainted coffin into that greasy hole. Gloomily the Hon. Peter watched them. So this was the end of one who had loved and been loved, who had known hope and joy, a conscious centre round which the glory of the universe revolved. He did not exactly think these things but the sentiment of them penetrated him. With a shovel he sprinkled a little earth on the coffin. Then he gave a hundred franc bill to each of the men, leaving them speechless.

The sight of that gaping grave had affected him strangely. He felt almost sober. He wondered about this unknown pauper and wanted to question the strange girl, but already she had gone. However, on the road leading to the main gate he overtook her.

"Who is your friend?" he asked.

She started, regarding him a moment. She wore a black *béret* drawn over her head. All he could see of her face in the growing dusk was a white mask pitted with dark hollows for eyes.

"It was no friend of mine," she said curtly.

"Then, why did you follow?"

"For pity, Monsieur. And because some day I too may go like that. Then I hope that some one will follow me in my turn."

With that she quickened her pace, but he strode by her side. She must be soaked by the rain, he thought. Over a thin, tight-fitting suit of cheap black serge she wore a short knitted woollen cape such as the wives of workmen wear.

He could hear her boots squelch as she walked. He became curious about her, the more so as she seemed insensible to his interest.

Then suddenly he was conscious of a craving for a drink. Come to think of it it was over two hours since he had had one. They had reached the fortifications and through the gates of the city he could already see the beckoning gleam of a café. He laid his hand on the girl's shoulder——

“Come and have a glass.”

She drew away.—“Thanks, Monsieur, I don't need one.”

“You do. Come on. Don't be a fool.”

He pushed her through the swinging doors into the café, a villainous den of dirty walls, stained tables and filthy floor. The patron, a hunchback, came to serve them and the girl, with a shrug of her shoulders, accepted the situation. He ordered two hot grogs.

Sitting down, he watched his companion. She was rather tall and of slight figure. She looked to be about twenty, or even less. Her hands were white, and she wore a wedding ring.

The hunchback brought the two drinks. He stared at the girl curiously but she seemed to avoid his gaze. Peter drained his grog at a gulp. God! how it bucked him up!

“Another,” he demanded.

The girl had taken off her *béret*: her hair was jet black, thick and glossy. Her eyebrows were clearly marked and her eyes had long black lashes. There were shadows under them that heightened their brilliance. Her face was without colour and very thin. There was no rouge on her hollowed cheeks; while her lips, slightly drooping, were pale too.

He was studying her wonderingly when the patron returned with the second grog. The man regarded the girl with a grin.

“I thought I knew you. *Bonsoir, l'Irlandaise.*”

The girl nodded sullenly; then she leaned her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hand, and stared at her com-

panion. The Hon. Peter, not to be outdone, did the same. There, over the steaming grog, they eyed one another.

She was seeing a man of about fifty, of slightly under middle height, with a lean figure. His complexion was a dark red, and his eyes, a light blue. His hair was a silvery grey. His face was strong-featured, with a jutting nose and a grim-set mouth. He was clean-shaven, but his cheeks were hollowed and his face so fleshless that it had a wedge-like look. Under his eyes were baggy pouches. His brow was high, and narrow rather than broad. It was a face with a curious mixture of strength and weakness, and it was the face of a very sick man.

Perhaps the girl was thinking this as she looked into his eyes, for they were bitterly weary eyes. Even as she looked they closed. A curious faintness had come over him, his heart was throbbing wildly. He put out his hand and caught at her elbow; but it was not the clutch of desire, rather the clinging grasp of a man who needs help. Now he held both of her thin arms and his hands tightened. She was afraid.

"Let go," she faltered, "you're hurting me." Then, wrenching herself free: "You *have* hurt me, you brute!"

The Hon. Peter's mood changed. He took out his monocle and stared at her intently. After all, who was this girl? May be she had followed him from the start.

"Pah!" he said. "None of your airs. I know your kind."

He fumbled inside his coat, drawing forth his fist-full of money.

"I don't want you. I'm a sick man. But take all those, you damned little baggage."

She rose straight and tense. Her great eyes seemed to flame in her pale face. There was rage and resentment in them, then bitter contempt.

"You drunken beast!" she cried in English.

Then, taking up her untasted glass of liquor, she dashed it in his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAN WHO WAS DOOMED

The Hon. Peter wiped away the hot grog that ran down his face.

"What you did was quite in the best cinema manner," he drawled. "If you had been a man I should probably have killed you, but, being a woman, I can only admire you. I take back all I said. I beg your pardon most humbly. And now sit down."

She made a motion as if to go.

"Ah! You are afraid of me," he jeered.

"Neither of you nor any other man." Then she added as if to herself: "Except one."

"Good! I am afraid of no man, not even one. For why? I'll tell you. In a year's time I'm due to die. That year will be a bit of hell for me anyway, so what does it matter if I die now? A man already doomed does not know what fear is. Sit down."

Staring at him curiously she obeyed.

"You think, perhaps I'm mad, or drunk. Maybe I am, but at this moment I assure you my brain is clear. You'd better take that money as a gift—a gift from a man booked for the Great Beyond, as a poetical Johnny might put it."

"I don't want your money."

"But my dear girl, I've got beastly heaps of it. I'm doing my best to get rid of some of it before I go. That little bunch means nothing to me. I've stacks and stacks like that, and not a soul to leave it to. I can afford to throw it away with both hands."

"I've no need of money."

"I don't believe that. But at least take charge of it for me till we are clear of this dump. There are two pale youths over there by the bar who would stick a knife in me for ten

sous. Our genial host, too, has his eyes on us. Come! Let me show you I trust you."

With a furtive glance over her shoulder the girl snatched up the wad of bills and crammed it into her blouse. She was just in time, for the hunchback was slyly hovering near. The Hon. Peter ordered brandy.

"Fill a glass and leave the bottle," he said. Then, to his companion: "Will you have some?"

She shook her head. The patron grinned.

"He knows you?" asked Peter.

"May be he . . ."

She checked herself suddenly. Again Peter wondered. He was sure he had seen the hunchback wink at the girl. He had a quickening suspicion that she was playing some game with him. This shady café was evidently well known to her. It had all the sinister taint of the underworld. And his suspicions were not calmed when the two pale youths went out with a polite: "*Bonsoir.*"

"You know them?" again demanded Peter.

For a moment she was silent, then she bent forward.

"Two choice specimens of the Paris apache; you were not far wrong when you said they would stab you for a song."

Again Peter wondered. She was watching him intently, her elbows on the table, her chin resting in the wedge of her hands. Her great dark eyes stared at him. They were wide set eyes, and there was something disconcerting in their unwavering regard. He saw now that her face was clearly, even sharply cut, her nose exquisite in shape, her chin moulded with delicacy. And again he was struck by the contrast between the glossy black of her hair and the soft pallor of her skin

"You know, you interest me," he told her.

"You don't interest me," she said indifferently.

"I will before I've done."

She shrugged her shoulders. She seemed to be studying him. He had opened his old trench coat and screwed his

monocle into his weak-sighted eye. She remarked that his hands were well cared for. Under his coat he wore a suit of Levat tweed and a soft silk shirt. He might be a drunken fool of an Englishman, but he was well-groomed, even in his cups.

"Why do you soak yourself with that cognac?" she demanded abruptly.

"My dear girl, a very bewitching woman once told me I was most charming when I was drunk. Since then I have consistently tried to be charming."

"You're not. You're a pig."

"Grunted . . . I mean, granted. But so far, my little *Fleur de pavé*, you only see the swinish side of me. I can really be quite nice and, during the limited time our acquaintance lasts, I will try to prove it. Will you have a cigarette?"

"No, *merci*."

"I will. It's *taboo*. Bad for my beastly heart, but I will all the same. I say, just feel my heart, will you?"

He took her hand and pressed it over his chest. With a startled exclamation she withdrew it.

"It's knocking like a hammer."

He laughed. "That's nothing. You should feel it stop, then race to catch up. That's what I call its dot-and-carry-one movement. Then sometimes it turns a somersault. It makes me gasp as if a paving stone was dropped on my chest. You see I've got a 'whisky heart.' "

"You seem cheerful about it."

"Oh, I'm used to it by this time. It even fascinates me. I wonder what it's going to do next. I wait, I watch. It has taken me twenty years of steady drinking to achieve it. When I say 'steady' I mean relatively steady. I've had sober intervals. There was a trip into the Arctic after musk ox and two more, big game hunting in Africa. Then

there was the War, of course. Outside of that I have been pretty consistently pickled."

"Why do you do it?"

"Ah! Every once in a while I ask myself that same question. I expect it's in the blood. My grandfather drank himself to death and I'm told it skips a generation. . . . I say, I don't know why I talk to you like this. Somehow I want to confide in someone to-night."

He looked at her a little wistfully, but she gave him no encouragement. Her eyes were dark and brooding. He went on:

"I've had one fit, you know. Angina Pectoris. The doctor chap told me if I had another it would probably do me in. He gave me a year, if I *didn't stop drinking*. Well, as you see, I haven't stopped, and three months of the year are up."

He took a gulp of brandy. The girl was watching him keenly.

"But you are killing yourself," she said.

"Practically."

"Don't you want to live?"

"Not particularly."

She laughed. "Ah! You are droll, Monsieur. You're dramatic. And you say you're rich?"

"Rottenly so."

"Can nothing save you?"

"Nothing. My number's up."

"You were right, Monsieur, when you said you would interest me. You do."

Then, a sudden friendliness came into her manner and she laid a hand on his arm.

"Come. Let us get away from here. Some people I know are watching us, and it might not be safe for you."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GIRL WHO WAS LOST

The Hon. Peter followed the girl out of the café into one of the streets that skirt the fortifications. At this dark hour it was a dangerous neighbourhood. Sallow youths, furtive and cynical, slouched past, giving him a hard stare; then, seeming to recognize his companion, they would turn and mutter inaudibly. They appeared surprised, these prowling rats of the underworld.

"Where are you going now?" demanded the girl after a long silence.

"I don't know."

"You should go home. That's the best place for you. Otherwise you'll only get into trouble."

"I don't want to go home. That brandy bucked me up no end. When we reached the café I was all in; but now I seem to have a new lease of life. . . . No, by Gad! I'm feeling fine. I want to make a night of it. I say! Let's go to Montmartre have supper, dance."

She gave him a look of contempt.—"No, I'm going home."

"Then let me escort you."

"Impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"It would probably cost you your life."

"That wouldn't matter."

"It might cost me mine."

"Ah! That's different. Of what are you afraid?"

"Of my husband."

"Why? Doesn't he love you?"

"Too well."

"Don't you love him?"

"No. I hate him. But why am I answering your questions like this? What business is it of yours? I'm going to leave you."

Under the pale light of a gas lamp she stopped. On one side was the dark shadow of the fortifications, on the other the black wall of the La Villette slaughter house. As they stood there in the muddy street he stared at her pale face in which her dark eyes seemed to gleam mockingly. It was perhaps this suggestion of contempt that nettled him. All at once he had her in his arms.

With a sharp cry she pushed him away, striking savagely at his face.

"You wild cat! You hurt me," he raged.

"Did I? I meant to. I thought you said you were going to be nice. Come on again."

"I'm coming, you little devil."

He made a step towards her when, from the shadow of the fortifications, a man darted. He was small and wiry, with lean jaws and ratlike eyes. A knife glittered in the gas-light, and he made as if to spring at Peter. But the girl held him back.

"Don't you want me to puncture his hide, l'Irlandaise?" grumbled the man.

"No, this is my affair. Leave it to me."

The fellow hesitated and, as he did so, Peter suddenly kicked the knife from his grip. The next moment he had its owner by the throat. "You dog!" he snarled. "You would slit me up, would you? Now I'm going to squeeze your dirty windpipe till your eyes pop."

He would have done it too, had not the girl intervened. She caught his hands and forced him to relax his hold. The moment the little man was free he melted into the darkness.

"Fool!" exploded the girl. "Did I not tell you you would get hurt if you were not careful. Now . . . you can leave me."

"Damned if I will."

"Then your fate be on your own head."

She walked on sullenly and Peter kept pace beside her.

A reckless spirit of adventure seemed to possess him. He laughed as he looked at her.

"Ah! If I were only a hale man, I could take you from them all. Where's your husband?"

"In prison."

"The devil!"

"No, only a bandit. Maybe you've heard of him."

"Who is he?"

"Paul Spirelli."

Peter started. Of course he had heard of Spirelli. The man had an international reputation.

"I remember. I happened to be in Paris at the time he was arrested. It must be four years ago. They got him on the roof of a house on the Place Vendôme."

"Yes. He drew the police away. Let the others escape."

"There was a running fight. He was wounded."

"In the leg."

"Well, he's in gaol now. Why should you be afraid of him? He would never know what you do."

"He would. He knows everything. The others would tell him. . . . He left me enough money to live on till he came out."

"Is he very terrible?"

"No, very quiet. I never knew a man so quiet. That's what makes them fear him. He has more brains than all the others put together. He was their chief. He planned everything."

Peter began to remember more about the mysterious Spirelli. He specialized in jewel robberies. He had graduated in Science at Vienna University and they called him the "Savant." Among other things he had invented an apparatus by which stupefying gas could be projected into a room through the smallest aperture.

"So you are the wife of a criminal," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes, but I'm not a criminal."

"And you are true to your husband?"

"I am," proudly. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "But even if I were tempted to deceive him I dare not. Eyes are on me. For his sake the others watch me. They only wait for his release to gather round him again."

"When will that be?"

"Soon now."

"Did they love him?"

"They were afraid of him."

"And if you were false to him?"

"They would treat me like one of their own women. For his sake they treat me with respect, and take care all others treat me with respect."

"That's very curious."

A slinking shadow passed them. She seemed to shiver.

"Yes, I'm watched always. Even now I'm being watched."

Suddenly a change had come over her. She had lost her air of defiance. As if she felt the menace of that man who, even from a prison could enforce his will, she drew nearer to him.

"What is your first name?" Peter asked.

"Pascaline."

"An unusual one."

"Yes, my father called me that. He was an admirer of the great writer Pascal. My father was Irish and a poet. His name was O'Neill. That's why I can speak English."

"Pascaline O'Neill. I like that better than Pascaline Spirelli. Well, you're descended from a King of Ireland and I'm descended from a King of Scotland. My name's MacBeth. . . . But why can't you love Spirelli?"

"He frightens me."

"Why don't you hide, run away?"

"Wherever I hid he would find me. Wherever I fled to he would follow me. You don't know Spirelli."

It was really extraordinary the change that had come over her. Her eyes had a wild, hunted look, her white face was strained and drawn. Suddenly she clutched his arm.

"There's someone following us. We must try to give them the slip."

A little further along, a street branched off to the left. She drew him down it and, after going a few yards, pulled him sharply into a dark doorway. As they waited there they heard padding footsteps draw near; then two men passed almost at a run. When they had disappeared the girl caught his hand and they doubled back the way they had come. They took the first side street and were soon within sight of bright lights and shops.

"That's the Boulevard of La Villette. Now you can go home to your friends."

But the Hon. Peter shook his head. "I have no friends. They have all abandoned me. Who wants to be friends with a drunkard?"

"What are you going to do now?"

"Keep on drinking. I'm getting shaky again. Beginning to feel the need of one right now."

And indeed all his vitality seemed to be oozing out of him. He sagged forward. The artificial cheer faded from his eyes leaving them infinitely weary.

"It's my heart, my cursed heart. I'd forgotten it for a while. You made me forget it. Now it's taking its revenge."

Under the light of a lamp he put out a groping hand and clutched her shoulder. He hurt her, but she did not cry out this time.

"Excuse me," he stammered. "Dizziness. It came over me suddenly. . . . I say, don't desert me. Let me stay with you as long as I can."

With a great effort he tried to pull himself together. "I don't want to bore you with my afflictions. I'll be all right . . . when I can get a drink. You see . . . I must keep on drinking."

"Yes, but you really can't come much further. We're getting near to where I live. I told you there's real danger."

"My dear girl, I'm half dead now. You don't care what becomes of me."

Her manner hardened. "No, I don't."

"Neither do I."

She struck off into a badly lighted street that seemed to have no other outlet. Towards the end of it she stopped at the entrance to a gloomy court. She pointed to the back of the court.

"That's where I live. It's the haunt of thieves. It's called the Rat Rouge. Now, there's the money you gave me to guard for you. Take it and . . . *bonsoir*, Monsieur."

But Peter did not hear. His eyes were strained, his face contorted with pain. A red-hot knife seemed to be driven into his chest and twisted round. His breast bone was being riven apart. Clammy sweat stood on his brow, and on his writhing lips a thin foam gathered. He fought, trying to master his weakness.

"Brandy!" he gasped. "For the love of God! Brandy."

Then the pain became beyond all bearing and, with a choking cry, he fell.

CHAPTER SIX

TWO IN A TRAP

Slowly consciousness was coming back. With eyes closed he tried to remember. He had fainted at the mouth of that crapulous court. He was lying down. Was he still in the street?

Fearfully he opened his eyes. To his relief they rested on the tilt of a roof; then they roved round a tiny room under the tiles, till they settled on the girl asleep on a chair. She was hunched forward as if weariness had overcome her. A faint sunlight brightened the bit of sky framed by the dormer

window. He could hear the murmur of the city. A bell tolled midday and she awoke with a start.

When she saw his open eyes she sighed with relief. "Mon Dieu! I thought you were going to die."

"What happened?" he asked feebly.

"You had some sort of a fit. I was so frightened. I didn't know what to do. I think I lost my head. I ran to the bar of the Rat Rouge and got you some brandy. The Père Pinard forced it down your throat. After that your breathing was better. We carried you up here. He wanted to take you to a room of his own, but I made him bring you to mine. You understand, by the law of the streets I claimed you as my lover; it was the only thing to do. He refused to believe me at first. I have such a reputation for honesty among those people."

Then she added bitterly: "And now it's gone for ever, thanks to you."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorrow doesn't help me much. The Père Pinard went through your pockets. He seemed to think you had money. He found nothing, for I had it here in my blouse. He even accused me of taking it. I denied it, but told him that even if I had, it was my right. The law of the jungle. You are my prize, my prey. . . . Oh! I wish I'd never seen you. You've got me into a mess."

"I wish I'd died."

"You would have done so if I'd let you get into their hands. There's three of them and they have it in for you. There's Gros Bébé who hates you because he hates me; Georges who hates you because he likes me; Jojo who hates you because you kicked that knife out of his hand. A whole harvest of hate is ripe for you downstairs. How we are going to get clear of this place, Heaven only knows."

"Who are these men you speak of?"

"Spirelli's band. For his sake they protect me. Even Georges, him they call "Ear of a Dog," has respected me.

Up to now. If he could not have me himself, he took care no one else should. But for their protection what chance would I have had? Long ago I'd have been what you once called me. And now . . ."

"And now?"

"I might as well be. They think I picked you up on the street, like any common drab. I am dishonoured in their eyes, and that means more than you can imagine. I was one of the few decent things they believed in. Yet what could I do? It is Fate."

"What will happen now?"

"I don't know. They will probably tell Spirelli and he will throw me to them as a bit of offal to a pack of wolves. Ah! I'm done for, thanks to you."

Her hands were clenched, her brow knitted stormily.

"Ear of a Dog was up this morning. He said you'd bought me with that money you had. He tried to get at you. I kept him back but it was hard. He called you my lover. My lover! and I hate you. . . ."

"I'm sorry," faltered Peter weakly. "I wish you'd let me die there in the street. Why didn't you?"

"That's what I ask myself. And now what's going to become of me? I wish I were dead myself."

She burst into a storm of weeping that ceased as abruptly as it had begun. After that she sat staring at him with brooding eyes.

"Don't worry," he said miserably. "It can't be as bad as you say. If I've got you in a hole I'll get you out."

"How?"

"I can take you away from here. Put you in a place of safety. Come, let's go together."

He made an effort to rise, but fell back with a groan.

"There! You're not fit to move. Perhaps you'll be like that for days, and in the meantime we are at their mercy. I don't know what they're going to do. Even now they're planning something."

"Let them have the money. It means nothing to me."

"Oh, they'll get the money anyhow. But there are other debts to pay. Hush! Here's someone coming. Pretend you're asleep."

It was the Père Pinard. He opened the door cautiously, looking first at Peter, then at the girl.

"Hasn't he come to his senses yet?"

Sullenly she shook her head. The Père Pinard came forward, rubbing his hands one over the other.

"You're sure you didn't find any money on him?"

"No, I told you I didn't."

"Strange."—Peter knew that the old man was bending over him. Now he could feel stealthy hands all about him.

"Very strange. He had it yesterday morning. Of course he may have lost it, but Jojo shadowed him most of the day. Look here, my girl, if you know anything about it tell me. We'll say nothing to the others, and I'll see you get away. They're savage against you, you know."

"I tell you I know nothing."

"Well, well, I suppose I must let the boys take it in hand. Your friend looks as if he was going to die anyway. If he did it might save trouble. It's a pity. . . ."

Peter heard the door close and the old man's steps shuffling down the stairs. He cursed the weakness that overwhelmed him. Then he dared to open his eyes again.

"Gone?"

Apathetically she nodded. She was sitting with elbows on knees, chin cupped in hands, eyes staring gloomily.

"I feel as if I can't get my breath," complained Peter. "My chest's too tight. If only I could unbutton it. . . . Can't you open the window?"

Without a word she did so.

"And can't you give me something to drink, some brandy?"

A bottle stood on the table. She poured out a glass, which he gulped gratefully.

"That's better. Now I can begin to appreciate the diffi-

culties of our position. Suppose I were strong enough, couldn't we slip out?"

"No, there's only the stairway, and it leads to the bar. This morning I tried to go down but Georges stopped me. I told him I wanted to get a doctor for you. He told me he would do all the doctoring needed. There's no escape. They would kill us if we tried it."

"What about the roof?"

"Impossible. It slopes dangerously."

"Couldn't we attract the attention of the neighbours?"

"There are none. Père Pinard keeps this old hotel. Those who have rooms are of the underworld. No one would raise a finger to aid us. The house to the left is a storage warehouse rarely used, that to the right a workshop now closed. The houses at the other end of the court are the backs of those that face the street. We are absolutely at their mercy."

"Have you no weapons? A revolver?"

"Nothing."

"Ah! If I was only strong again I'd fight my way out. But there's my beast of a heart. I'd probably drop dead if I made a violent effort. It is curious. . . . This morning I didn't care whether I lived or not; now I feel I don't want to die. I don't want these dogs to get the better of me. Can't you think of a plan?"

"I've tried. My head aches with trying."

"Well, I'll try too. I can't believe it's as desperate as you think."

He closed his eyes, seeking to control his thoughts, but soon his senses seemed to slip away from him. He slept heavily.

When he awoke, the room was in darkness. After a little he made out a faint glow by the window. It was the reflection of the lighted sky. He began to see things dimly. There was the brandy bottle on the table. He would make an effort to get it.

He was raising himself when just outside his door he heard a sound that made him pause.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ENTER EAR OF A DOG

It was a woman's moan of pain. Then there was a thud on the door as of a body thrown against it. Then a man's voice fierce with fury:

"Ugh! Want some more, you——?"

"No, no. Keep your hands off me."

"I've kept my hands off you long enough. You're going to feel the weight of them now. I left you alone as long as I thought you were straight. You belonged to the Chief. Honour among thieves. As long as you acted square it was hands off for everyone. Well, that's over. You've fallen in the mud like the rest."

"I haven't. I swear I haven't."

"You've got a man in your room now, a man you brought in from the street."

"I thought he was dying. I did it out of pity."

"Pity! You think I believe that? You think Spirelli will believe that? What will he do when he hears of it? Spirelli can be terrible, and he was crazy about you. When he gets out what d'ye suppose is going to happen?"

A moment of silence; the voice went on.

"If ever you needed a protector you'll need one then. And who will that protector be? It will be me, little Georges. I too have always been crazy about you, l'Irlandaise, and from now on you belong to me."

"You daren't defy Spirelli."

"I dare anything for you. I do defy him. He has brains, science, but I too am no fool. And the others are with me. They'll back me up. I, not Spirelli, will be their leader."

"He will destroy all three of you."

"We'll see about that. If that day ever comes, then you too will be destroyed. . . . Where were you going when I stopped you on the stairs?"

"To fetch a doctor."

"Ha! A proof that you care for him."

"I thought he was dying."

"Why shouldn't he die? It would make things easier. A pillow across his mouth. . . . Here, let me go to him."

"Ah no. I won't let you. . . . I won't. . . ."

The Hon. Peter heard the sound of a struggle; then a man's voice hoarse with rage:

"You vixen! You'd bite me; you'd fight me. Take that . . . and that. . . . And now I know you do care for this dog of an Englishman. You brought him up here not because he was sick, but because you fancied him. Here! Get out of my way. Let me get at your lover."

"No, no, I swear it. Please hear me. . . ."

Her voice was choked as if savage hands squeezed her throat. There was absolute terror in her tone as she went on.

"I'll tell you the truth. . . . Listen . . . I don't care two *sous* for that man in there. I don't care if he does die. I brought him up here to . . . to rob him. I wanted his money. . . ."

A loud laugh from the man. "Now we're getting at it. The money? What money?"

"He had a lot. Notes, hundreds of them."

"And how do you know?"

"He showed them to me in the café kept by Charlot, the hunchback."

"And what did he do with them?"

"He returned them to his pocket."

"Then they must be there now."

"No, they're not."

"Ah! You have them."

"No, no."

"Where are they, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he lost them on the way here."

"You're lying. Come! You've got these notes."

"I haven't. Père Pinard helped me carry him upstairs and went through him as he lay on the bed."

"*Sapristi!* I didn't think of that. If that old fox has them there's little chance of him sharing up. Well, it narrows the matter down to the three of you; and before we come to Père Pinard, who'll be the most difficult, I must make sure of you two. Stand aside there. I'm going to search your room."

There was no attempt at prevention this time. Peter lay back and closed his eyes. It was Ear of a Dog who entered, followed by the girl.

"Haven't you got a candle?"

"On the table."

He lit it and, holding it above the bed, he looked hard at Peter.

"Hasn't he come out of this fit?"

"No."

"That's a pity. If he was just sleeping I could soon make him speak. But an unconscious man . . . Well, I tell you what I'm going to do: First of all I'm going to search him; second I'm going to search the room; third I'm going to search you."

Going to the door he turned the key and put it in his pocket. He laughed grimly at the fear that stared from her eyes.

"Let me tell you one thing more, l'Irlandaise. If I should find this money on him, in this room or on you, I'll have my revenge. I warn you solemnly, I'll do what I said—about the pillow. Then, when the job's done I'll have you kept here and send for the police. You see the fix you're in. . . ."

All at once he dropped his jeering manner and, bend-

ing close to her, he hissed: "Quick! You lying fool. If you have that money—and *I know you have*—spill it."

Fascinated, she stared at him. Twice she opened her lips as if to speak. Her eyes went to the figure on the bed; she shuddered violently. The man's vindictive face was outthrust and his fierce eyes burned into hers.

"Come on now. . . ."

Slowly her hand stole to her blouse and she drew forth the bundle of notes. With a cry of triumph *Ear of a Dog* clutched them.

"I thought so. How much? . . ."

Sitting down at the table he counted them rapidly. Then he stuffed them into a pocket.

"Better than I thought. Far, far better. Not a word of this to the others, d'ye hear. This is between us two . . . *Bon sang!* You carried it off fine, l'Irlandaise. For all your airs you're just a common thief like the rest of us. All the better. We're partners now, you and I; Spirelli, or the devil himself, won't take you from me. As for that swine on the bed, I knew when it came to a choice between us you wouldn't hesitate. You know a man when you see one, don't you, kid?"

He took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly. "Speak. . . ."

"Ye-es."

"And you're mine, mine?"

"Yes, yes."

"And this fellow can die for all you care?"

"Yes, but . . . I don't like death. I'm only a girl, not hardened like the rest of you. Now we've got his money, let's give him a chance. Let me get a doctor for him."

"Hum! It might be better. When he croaks we'll get a certificate. That old fellow on the rue de Flandre will be all right. You can call him if you like."

"I know where. I'll go now."

He unlocked the door and blew out the candle. The Hon. Peter heard them descending the stairs together, and once more he was alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FIGHT IN THE RAT ROUGE

For a long time he lay there, trying to think clearly. One thing burnt into his consciousness,—the girl had betrayed him. She was nothing but a common crook after all. And he had really believed in her honesty. Well, what could one expect?

Then, slowly, the conviction came to him that unless he could get out of this place he would surely die. He did not mind dying, but to perish miserably in a den like this. . . . Besides, he had one or two matters to settle first.

No, he would give anything for strength enough to escape. Perhaps if he could get at that brandy. It would surely brace him.

Rising up dizzily he clutched at the table and supported himself till he reached the bottle. In an instant he had it at his mouth and was drinking greedily.

Good old cognac! It always bucked him up. He had no trouble getting back to the bed now, and there he lay, still hugging the bottle. Then again his thoughts seemed to cloud.

He was aroused from a seeming stupor by the return of the girl. She came in quietly, closing and locking the door. For a moment she stood listening, breathing hard, then she bent over him and shook him gently.

“Are you awake?”

“Yes.”

“Were you awake?”

“Yes.”

“Then you heard?”

"All."

"Ah! I lied for you, didn't I?"

"Did you?"

"You surely believed I was lying when I swore I didn't care whether you died or not?"

"I didn't know. Why should you care?"

"But you couldn't possibly believe when I said I brought you here to rob you?"

"My mind's all tangled up. . . . No, of course, I didn't believe it."

"I'm honest," she went on passionately. "I gave up the money for your sake. He would have done as he threatened. He's the worst devil of the lot. I'm sorry. I tried to save your money. Was there a great deal?"

"About fifty thousand francs."

She seemed appalled. "*Mon Dieu!*"

"That's nothing. The money doesn't matter."

"Perhaps we'll get it back. Do you know what I've done? Something that will have terrible consequences for me, but I don't care."

"What have you done?"

"I got him to let me go for a doctor. Well, I didn't go for a doctor, I went for the police."

"You did!"

"Yes, I've betrayed them. It's all over with me now. They'll kill me when they find out."

"And what are the police doing?"

"I told them everything. The house must be surrounded now. They had to get together the men for dangerous work. The Chief told me it would take a little time. If he can only capture all three I'll be safe for a while perhaps. I came on quickly to prepare you. I don't think anyone saw me, but they'll get to know. Oh, I'm afraid now, afraid. . . ."

In the dim light reflected from the night sky he could make her out crouching by the bed. Then she clutched at him nervously, seeming to listen.

"I'm afraid of Georges, more afraid than ever I was of Spirelli. I can't tell you how he fills me with loathing. My very flesh crawls when he touches me. He tried to kiss me on the way downstairs, and I could have cried out. But I begged him to wait till I got back. Perhaps he'll be up soon. Oh that the police would hurry!"

There in silence they waited, every nerve strained to snapping pitch. Peter breathed with difficulty and cursed his impotence. By his side the girl cowered terrified. All at once she gave a convulsive start.

"I hear a step on the stair. He's coming now."

Peter, too, heard the step and prayed for strength. There was a knock at the door.

"Open there, curse you. Why d'you lock the door?"

"Lie still," she whispered. "Pretend you're unconscious."

Then, slowly she got up and turned the key.

"What were you doing?"

"Half asleep. I'm tired out."

"I fancied I heard you speaking."

"To myself perhaps. I have evil dreams."

"Is this fellow still unconscious?"

"I think so. I didn't look."

"Light the candle."

He watched her as she did so. He had been drinking, for there was a glow in his eyes, a glow that blazed to a flame as savagely he caught her to him.

"You beautiful creature, now you're mine. I've waited long for you but that makes you all the more appetizing. At last! . . ."

He locked her powerfully in his arms. He strained her to him, forcing his lips to hers. She tilted back her head, but he threw an arm round her neck, persisting in that brutal kiss. His back was to the bed and the girl was facing it. Suddenly the horror in her eyes changed to amazement.

For she saw the Hon. Peter rise softly and, swinging the brandy bottle by the neck, bring it smashing down on the man's head.

.

Ear of a Dog lay on the floor, blood running from his cracked skull.

"Didn't I fetch him a rare wollop," said Peter, sinking back as if exhausted with the effort.

"Oh the beast! the loathsome beast!" cried the girl. "And now what shall we do? We must get him out of the way. Some of the others may come up. They're all drinking downstairs."

"Shove the swine under the bed," Peter suggested. "Did I do for him?"

"No, he's not dead. . . . Hush! . . . I told you so. Someone's coming. Lie still."

"There was a quick heavy step mounting towards them. The bed was low. With a great effort she managed to push the body under it. It was the formidable Gros Béb  who entered. As he flung open the door there was excitement in his face.

"Is Georges here?" he snapped.

"No."

"Haven't you seen him?"

"No."

"I'm sure he came up here."

"Perhaps he's gone to one of the other rooms," said the girl indifferently.

Gros B b  looked all round suspiciously. Peter lay without movement on the bed and the blankets, hanging to the floor, concealed the body underneath. Still suspicious, Gros B b  retreated. They heard him routing about in the rooms below.

"Something's alarmed them," whispered the girl. "Maybe

they've seen the police in the court. . . . Here's another coming."

This time the step was light and springy. It was the weasel-faced Jojo who now entered, and his rat-like eyes glinted with excitement.

"Where are they, l'Irlandaise,—Georges, Gros Bébé? The *flics* are on us. Someone's blabbed."

Then his eyes fell on Peter. He drew a deep breath and his lips twisted cruelly.

"*Sacré nom d'une puce!* The *type* that gripped me by the gullet! Well he couldn't grip much now, the pig. I've half a mind to slit his *gosier*."

He whipped out his knife and drew it lightly across the throat of the man on the bed. The man *under* the bed stirred a little.

"No foolishness," cried the girl, clutching his arm. "If the police are below you'll get us all into trouble."

Then she drew a sharp breath of terror, for she saw a hand protrude from under the hanging blanket. Jojo's foot was within an inch of it. She pushed the little man back.

"No, no," she screamed. "I hear them below, the police. Quick! Find Georges and Gros Bébé. They'll be caught. . . ."

Jojo listened. "It's Mouchette, Gros Bébé's girl. He sent her to follow you soon after you'd gone for the doctor. She should have been back before. . . ."

He stared with sudden suspicion. "Someone's called the cops on us. If it's you . . ."

He glared at her, his loose mouth writhing malignantly his knife point quivering at her throat. Then he turned and darted downstairs, overtaking Gros Bébé in his headlong flight. A woman's shrill voice came up to them. Cowering by Peter's side, the girl listened.

"She's telling them. . . . She went to the doctor's and found I'd not been there. Heaven help us now. It's the

end. They'll revenge themselves. Oh! that the police would hurry . . . hurry. . . ."

"Quick! Lock the door," cried Peter. "Hark! they're coming back."

No sooner had she done so than the men reached the landing. Sharply the handle was turned. A curse:

"Locked! The lying jade!"

"Burst it in, Bébé."

There was a pause, a rush, a heavy body hurled against the door. It strained ominously but still held. Peter had risen. He swayed as he stood. He was weak and giddy, and he groaned in his despair.

"If I only had a bit of strength I'd beat 'em yet."

Lifting the only chair in the room he poised it over his head. The girl was groping under the bed.

"We'll make a scrap of it, anyway," gasped Peter. "Get behind me there. If I go down I'll go down fighting."

Another leap, another crash. This time the lock gave way, the door flew open. There was a long pause. . . .

The girl had blown out the light, but in the gloom they could see the two men crouching for their spring. With chair heaved high Peter waited, and the girl cowered by his side. There was a moment of suspense, of terror long drawn out; then . . .

A shot smote the silence. A hoarse groan, a snarling cry. Who was shooting?

"I'm hit," groaned Gros Bébé. "They're armed. Shoot quick, Jojo."

"Haven't got my gun. . . . Curse the luck!"

As the two men crouched irresolute there was a scream from below: "Save yourselves. The police! The police are breaking in."

"Like a flash the two vanished. Peter heard them tumbling down the steep flight of stairs. From below came shouts, shots, silence.

He dropped wearily on the bed. "What happened?"

"I thought of it suddenly," she told him. "Georges always carries a browning. I found it in his hip pocket and fired. Here they come—the police."

It was the two detectives who had entered the café in the early morning. They mounted the stairs cautiously, automatics in hand. She called to them.

"It's safe. They've gone."

"Where are they?"

"There's a trap door in the cellar and a secret passage to the next house. They must have escaped that way."

"*Nom d'un chien!* You should have told us of that. The rats have slipped us, but we'll get 'em yet."

It was Inspector Bouchon who spoke. To his men below he barked a swift command. Then;

"Where's your Englishman?"

"On the bed."

"Light the candle, Lemoine. . . . It's the *type* we saw yesterday morning. There's a rare fuss about him too. They were telephoning to Headquarters about him from the British Consul's. Seems to be a somebody. He's not dead, anyway."

Peter raised his head. "I'm all right, old chap. Just a bit wobbly. Give us an arm downstairs."

The two supported him. In the café, the Père Pinard and a woman were in the hands of the police.

"You old fox!" growled Inspector Bouchon to the hotel keeper, "I've been wanting to close up this den for months. I've got the goods on you this time. . . . He's one of the worst 'receivers' in Paris," he told Peter.

"I'm sending a man to see you safe home," went on the Inspector as he signalled to a waiting taxi.

"But you'll let her come with me," begged Peter, pointing to the girl.

"Yes, we don't want her. . . . Oh, I forgot. What about that money of yours?"

A sharp cry came from the girl. "I have it. I took it

from him when I took the pistol. They were both in the same pocket. Here's the bundle."

She held it out to Peter.

"I'm so glad I saved it."

"What's that?" said the Inspector sharply. "Took it? How?"

"Oh! I forgot to tell you, Inspector," said Peter. "There's one of them under the bed. I smacked him over the bean. Wasted a bottle of good brandy on the blighter."

Turning swiftly the two men re-entered the café, but in a few moments they were back.

"*Vraiment*, we have no luck to-night. No one there now. Who was it?"

"Routis,—Ear of a Dog," said the girl.

"*Sacré!* Why didn't you say so before! There now, our little Georges has fooled us again."

CHAPTER NINE

THE HOUSE THAT WAS WATCHED

"James."

The bed-room door opened and a man entered. He was pale and portly, with severe side whiskers and an expression of invincible correctitude.

"Yes, Sir."

The Hon. Peter raised his head from the disordered pillows. His face was no longer of that rich brick colour, but of a livid pallor, and his features were sharp and haggard.

"I say, James," he said in a weak voice, "bring me a bottle of Clicquot."

The valet made a gesture of protest. "Champagne, Sir, to begin the day? Really, it isn't done. Now, Sir, a good cup of coffee . . ."

"Coffee, you rascal! You dare to suggest coffee to a man with a hesitating heart. No, James, I know best."

"But the doctor said you were getting such a lot better, Sir. Yesterday there was a positive amelioration."

"Damn the doctor. Fetch the Clicquot."

The valet obeyed. The cork popped and, as Peter raised the glass, his eyes brightened.

"That's the stuff. A short life and a merry one, James."

"You're certainly bent on abbreviating your existence," said James.

"I certainly am. Hold the glass for me. My hand's wobbly. Ah! that's the best medicine. Give me a cigar."

"A cigarette, Sir."

"A cigar. Richard's himself again. How long have I been lying here?"

"Five days, Sir."

"Five days since they brought me home. You must have been worried when you got back with the car and found me gone."

"I was permeated with anxiety, Sir. That is why I communicated my inquietude to the Consul."

"Yes, I was away three days. By Gad! I did have an extraordinary adventure. As I lie back here, surrounded by luxury and guarded by a faithful fellow like yourself, it seems incredible."

"I should never have left you, Sir; but you insisted on my fetching the car from London."

"Yes, I wanted to get away to the country. If I'm going to die I don't want to die in a beastly city. I want trees, and a wide horizon, and the sound of the sea. I'm a silly sentimentalist after all."

"You're too obsessed with the idea of your malady, Sir. The French doctor said that your constitution was fundamentally resistant, and that if only you would adopt a model life you might even yet aspire to longevity. Because you're as strong as a horse, Sir, it's no reason why you should . . ."

"Live like an ass, eh!"

"I was going to say: abuse the bounty of nature," went on James with dignity.

"I know. You've been preaching like that for the last fifteen years. It does seem a shame, though, how I've gone to the devil. Used to rather fancy myself, didn't I?"

"You were magnificent, Sir. I will always recall the occasion you won the light-weight championship of the Army."

"Yes, that was ages ago."

"Nearly twenty years, Sir."

"You've been with me a long time, James. You've followed me over half the world. Well, I'm going on another long trip pretty soon, but I'll have to travel alone this time."

"But you'll be coming back, Sir."

"Ah no. On the trail I'm taking one never comes back. Oh, I know. . . . If I lived a godly, righteous and sober life, I might hang on for a bit. But what a bore. No, I'll be glad when the whole business is wound up. For some time back it's been a rotten show. Let the curtain drop. . . . Anyway, when I go you won't need to look for another job. I've left you ten thousand pounds, my lad. That, with your savings, should keep you comfortably."

"Don't talk that way, Sir. You'll see me interred."

"I hope not. You've been a priceless servant, and I've given you a devil of a time, but I've appreciated you. You've never married, James. Why?"

"Never had time, Sir. Too busy looking after you."

"And you're a good-looking man. A bit fat, but you carry it well. How old are you?"

"In the vicinity of forty, Sir."

"Ten years younger than I. Well, when I 'go over,' you must marry, have a lot of kids. I wish I could see you with 'em. Maybe my ghost will come back. . . . I say, James, what about that girl I brought home with me?"

"Mademoiselle?"

"Hmmm! Mademoiselle! Well, that's all right. How's she getting along?"

"Nicely, Sir. She seems very nervous, poor creature. She hasn't left the house since she came. Keeps looking out of the windows from behind the blinds, as if she expected to see someone she didn't want to see."

"Ah! You haven't noticed any suspicious characters hanging about?"

"No, sir, not particularly. Wait a minute. There was a pedlar who wanted to tell fortunes. The cook admitted him into the kitchen but I soon dispatched him about his business."

"Right. Better be careful. What's Mademoiselle doing with herself?"

"She sews a lot. Helps the housekeeper, too. She makes herself useful. Nursed you when you were sick, Sir. Most devoted."

"Was she! Listen, James, I begin to take an interest in this girl, quite a . . ."

"I know, Sir. An avuncular interest."

"That's it. Well I'm going to help her if I can. Give her an education."

"She seems to have a pretty good one already, Sir. She speaks excellent English and with a surprising fluency for a French young lady."

"That's where you're wrong. She's Irish, really."

"Like myself, Sir."

"Yes. Her father was an O'Neill, a gentleman of misfortune. Well, I intend to leave her provided for, and I want you to help her too. Try to understand her; so that when I go you can take my place, be a sort of guardian over her."

"I'll strive to fulfil your wishes, Sir. Already the young lady has made a favourable impression on me."

"All right, you might send her to me."

The Hon. Peter propped himself up with pillows and poured out another glass.

"Now, if only Pascaline and James could hit it off," he meditated. "I must try to arrange that. James is about twenty years older than she is, but stranger things have happened. Ah! here she comes."

Somewhat timidly the girl entered. She wore a long white duster buttoned to her throat. Her gleamy black hair which she had formerly coiled on top of her head was now parted low on the brow, braided and coiled over the nape of her neck. The change seemed to alter her whole expression. No more was she the strange, defiant creature of the streets. Her lips had lost their hopeless droop and had now a sweetness almost childlike. Her velvety dark eyes had no longer that hard, bitter look, but were starlike in the pure pallor of her face. She stood there tall and graceful, but shy and constrained.

"Please come in and close the door. By Jove! I'd scarcely have known you. Already your face has lost its peaked look. It's getting a lovely oval. And you've done your hair differently. Changes you from a queen of the tenderloin to a Madonna."

"I did it that English way to please you," she said in a low voice.

"That's nice of you. I like it. Sit down, won't you? You know, I don't know what to call you. I can't keep on calling Pascaline every five minutes. In a way it suits you, but it's too dignified. I tell you, I'll call you 'Caline.' It means in French, 'caressing,' doesn't it? May I call you 'Caline?'"

"Anything that pleases you, Monsieur."

"What did your father call you?"

"He sometimes called me 'Callie.'"

"Callie O'Neill. Not bad. But I like Caline better. We'll try how it goes. And maybe you'd better hang on to

the O'Neill part. We're going to get it back anyway. We're going to divorce you from the egregious Spirelli. You wish it, don't you?"

She shivered. Sitting with hands folded in her lap, her eyes went for a moment to the window. Then she turned to him and nodded.

"Agreed. We'll manage that. Money can manage any old thing, especially in France. We'll set the machinery of the law in motion, we'll even accelerate it. . . . Of course, though I have no puritanical prejudice on the subject, I take it you were . . . technically married to the man?"

"We were married in Rome, according to the Church."

"Ah! not omitting the Church!"

"No. For my sake he insisted on that. There's good and bad in all men, but in him it was divided rather than mixed. I used to think there were two Spirellis—one who would kneel before the holy altar, and one who would steal the silver candlesticks."

"Queer chap! . . . You know, you talk awfully well,—English I mean."

"Spirelli spoke it with me. His mother was English and he prided himself on his accent. He spent a year at Oxford. We always talked in that language before the others. They didn't like it."

"He seems to have looked after you well."

"He took pains with me, and he kept the others away. I was only sixteen when he married me. Oh, he was good to me, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to love him. And when I discovered he was a criminal I came to hate him."

"Well, I think we may count him out of your life for good now. I was wondering what would be the best thing for you. Would you like me to place you in a convent for awhile?"

A look of fear came into her eyes. "Please don't send me away from you," she begged. "Let me stay. I'm afraid."

"Of whom?"

"Of them all. They'll kill me in some horrible way."

They never forgive a traitor. Even if they have to wait years they'll get me. Please keep me near you."

"Well, we'll say no more about the convent, but you mustn't be afraid. I'm going to protect you from now on. After all, you saved my life, so I have the right. And I'll see that you're provided for, so you needn't worry about the future."

Impulsively she bent her head over his hand and kissed it. He drew it back with some dismay.

"You're not cross I did that?" she asked woefully.

"No, no, but . . . it isn't done, you know."

"I'm sorry. I have no way of showing my gratitude. What would have happened to me if I hadn't met you? I hate to think of it. You have saved me. . . . It all seems like a dream. I can't realize it. I'll only be able to do so slowly, and then bit by bit I'll try to show you how very, very grateful I am. I'd have been lost but for you. Now I have hope."

"That's all right. Only please don't get sentimental. You know, I detest sentiment. I'm really a hard, practical sort of a chap. I'm doing this as much for my own sake as anything. I want someone to look after me for the short time that remains. You'll nurse me when I need nursing and curse me when I need cursing. Don't imagine your job's an easy one. However, when it's over, you'll have your reward. Some day you'll marry and have a lot of kiddies. I wish I could see you. Maybe my ghost will come back . . ."

He paused, remembering he had already said that.

"No, no. I'll never marry again," protested the girl.

"And why do you talk about ghosts?"

"Because, my dear, I'm an old man, old enough to be your father. And I'm a very sick man too."

"The doctor says you might live another thirty years if . . ."

"If I gave up liquor and tobacco and all that makes life

worth living. Thank you. I wouldn't if I could. I'm doomed. Just feel my heart at this moment."

She put a hand on his chest. "Mon Dieu! It's leaping."

"Bah! That's nothing. That's its hop-step-and-jump movement. It's an eccentric little beast, this heart of mine. Sometimes it stops so long I think it's struck for good; then it gets on the job again. Fascinating rather. Sort of sword of Damocles. I never know the moment I'm going to pop off. The Harley Street specialist told me to give up wine and cigars.

"And if I don't?" I asked.

"Then you'll die in a year," said he.

"All right," said I; "I will be one fool less in the world." That night in the Café Royal I ordered a bottle of Champagne and lit my cigar with his prescription."

"Why do you go on taking the stuff?" she said suddenly. "I'm going to take it from you."

Deliberately she possessed herself of the bottle.

"All right, I can get lots more."

"But you *must* make an effort to stop. You are killing yourself."

"What's death? I'm not afraid of that. I've faced it too often, seen too many of my pals meet it with a smile. Maybe they'll be waiting for me when I 'go over.' Wouldn't that be ripping? The best of 'em all gone. A rotter like me hanging on. No, I laugh at death. I welcome death. But I'd have liked to die in battle. Well, if I can't die fighting I'll die drinking, a glass in my hand and a laugh on my lips. That's it. . . . I'll go out laughing at death."

He took up the glass of champagne that remained to him and raised it.

"Here's to Death. Here's to the Great Release."

But she held his hand. "I won't let you. I won't let you be a coward."

"It doesn't matter. You can't always watch me. But I'm glad you tried to stop me. Well, I promise you I won't

drink any more for the present. . . . By the way, you and James get on nicely, don't you?"

"I like him."

"You're not getting enough fresh air. Your face is pale and tired-looking. Now I have a very excellent car pining for action, and James is a first class chauffeur. What's to prevent you going for a spin in the Bois now and again?"

Her eyes brightened at the prospect. "I'd love it." Then suddenly growing grave— "But I'm afraid."

"Ha! Who's the coward now?"

Slowly she went to the window and peered between the curtains. Then she shrank back as if she had received a blow.

"What is it? What did you see?"

She looked again. "Quick!" she gasped. "He's disappearing round the corner."

A pyjama-clad Peter sprang from the bed and together they gazed.

"There! Don't you recognize him?"

"By Gad! You're right. It is that damned little viper they called Jojo."

CHAPTER TEN

THE LONG ARM OF THE UNDERWORLD

"There, that's the last of them," said James as he finished brushing the eleventh suit. "It's time master was ordering a new wardrobe. His clothes simply dangle on him, he's so thin."

"I think he's getting less thin," said Pascaline. "Perhaps he'll fit them again at the rate he's going."

"If he does, the credit will be yours, Miss,—what with the care you take of him and the way you eliminate his liquor."

"Don't you think he's drinking less than he used to?"

"Why, you've got him down to about half. The rate you're going you'll have him weaned before the year's out. I don't see how you do it."

"Haven't you heard of the story of the man who drank a bottle a day? He knew it was killing him, so he started dropping a tiny pebble into the bottle. Next day he dropped two, then three, then increased by one a day. As the pebbles mounted up he found he was drinking only half a bottle, then a third, then a quarter; and at last the day arrived when the pebbles filled the bottle and he was cured. That's my system, a little less every day, and he submits like a child. . . . But what's keeping Madame Bineau to-night? It's after ten and she's not back."

"Why, so it is. She said she was just going out for an hour to see her married daughter that's expecting. A worthy soul, Madame Bineau."

"How long has she been housekeeper here?"

"Ever since master took the apartment. That's three years ago now. Yes, I'm surprised she's not back. May be something's happened. With her daughter in that interesting way you never know. Funny! I almost went out myself to-night, only I didn't want to leave you and the guvnor."

"That was nice of you, James."

"I wasn't going to mention it, but about nine a boy brought a message that I was wanted at the garage. I thought it queer, so I 'phoned to see what was wrong. Well, would you believe it, the garage man said he had never written any note. Curious, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"What do you make of it?"

"Looks as if someone wanted to get you out of the way to-night."

"But why should anyone want to do that?"

"So that there would be no one in the house but your master and myself."

"I don't understand."

"I think I do . . . James, has Monsieur never told you what happened during those three days he was away? How he just escaped death?"

"No. He might escape death a dozen times a day and he'd never say a word. He's that sort."

"Well, I feel I ought to tell you."

Rapidly she sketched the events that had for scene the Rat Rouge. James listened with steadily growing gravity that was punctuated by exclamations of amazement and dismay.

"So that was the way of it," he said finally. "Beyond a doubt you saved the gov'nor's life."

"No, I don't think that. If it hadn't been for me he'd never have got into trouble."

"I don't know. He's always had a gift for getting into trouble. . . . Why, what in the world is keeping Madame Bineau? It's nearly eleven. I've half a mind to step round to her daughter's place and ask after her."

"No, you must not. You must not leave us alone here, James. It's strange, but I've got the queerest feeling that that there's something wrong. How was Monsieur when you saw him last?"

"Sleeping like a baby. Would you like me to see if he's all right?"

"Yes. I'll go with you, though. I won't let you leave me."

As they went down the long corridor she clutched his arm nervously.

"Enter softly so as not to awake him," she whispered. James pushed the door open gently, and they both stared at what they saw. Through a large arched window the moonlight flooded in and fell upon the bed. In that green glam-

our Peter lay like a dead man, flat on his back, stretched out straight and stiff; his hands clasped over his breast. For a moment the girl had a heart-leap of fear; but the next instant she was reassured for she heard his steady breathing.

"He's all right. Just like a child. I love to see him like that."

Indeed sleep seemed to have ironed out the wrinkles on Peter's face. In the moonlight it had a tranquillity almost uncanny. The sharp lights and shadows gave his bold features a sculptural quality. Softly they retreated.

"Don't you think you should have shuttered the window?" asked the girl.

"The master likes to see the daylight come in. He hasn't many more daylights he says, and he does not want to miss any. . . . It's not like Madame Bineau to keep us so late. Perhaps she's staying the night at her daughter's. Anyway she has her key. I think I'll go to bed."

"You can go if you like, James, but I'll stay up. I have a feeling there's something wrong."

"Then I'll wait up too, Miss. I won't leave you."

They sat in the library and tried to read. The girl, however, was apprehensive and alert. As it drew on to midnight the quietness of the house seemed to increase. It was a silence almost oppressive, and James felt constrained to break it at last

"I've been wondering, Miss, why anyone should want to harm master, and him a poor sick man."

"You don't understand. It's I they would harm. I have committed the sin of sins. I have betrayed them to the police. There is one punishment for the traitor—death or mutilation. If they could get at me they would throw vitriol on my face. I'm afraid of that more than of death. Any of their women would do it. It's a law among them. I must not be allowed to escape. They considered me as one of them, even though I kept myself apart. They suspect I know many of their secrets. . . ."

She shivered as she looked fearfully about her.

"You see my position. They think I'm a danger to them. They must silence me. They have their code and I have defied it. I must pay. They will never cease to pursue me and in the end they will get me."

As she leaned forward, her hands clenched and her great eyes staring darkly from her pale face, some of her fear seemed to pass into him.

"Perhaps it's not so bad as you imagine," he said nervously. "I can't help thinking you exaggerate. Excuse me a moment. I want to go to the kitchen."

"You won't be long."

"No. Anyway the shutters are closed."

"All?"

"All except those in master's room. Don't be afraid. No one could get at you."

As she sat there her thoughts took a desperate turn! "I should not remain here. I should go away . . . anywhere . . . disappear. I am a traitor. I must face my fate. Here I am only a danger to others. No one else must suffer for what I have done. . . ."

How slowly the minutes passed! Her thoughts went to Peter sleeping like a child, his hands folded as if in prayer. He must not come to any harm through her. Yet perhaps they would strike in his direction. They certainly would if they thought it would hurt her. In any case they would leave no stone unturned to get at her, and woe betide whoever got in their way. Ah! she knew them so well.

The sound of James moving about in the kitchen comforted her, and presently he returned bringing a tray with hot coffee.

"If we must sit up," he said, "it will keep us awake. By the way I noticed a strange thing, Madame Bineau didn't take her key. It's hanging on a nail in the kitchen. That shows she meant to get back early."

The girl gave an exclamation of relief. James looked at her inquiringly.

"You know what I was afraid of," she explained. "I was afraid they might have got hold of the key. Then it would have been so easy to slip into the house. If they had got it they might even be here now."

James was uneasy. "Hadn't we better look?"

"That's all right. We're sure no one is in the house. Is the hall door bolted?"

"No, let's do it."

Softly they tiptoed across the dark hall and shot the bolt. The sound was startling and the silence that followed almost as startling. Suddenly James felt his arm clutched.

"Did you hear something?" she said in a breath.

"Nothing. What was it?"

"It sounded to me like a groan."

"Let me go down and see."

"Never. You mustn't open. There's danger out there. You don't know who's outside in the dark. It may be a trick."

"Are you sure you heard something? Let's listen again."

Leaning close to the door they waited breathlessly, but no sound could they hear.

"It's quiet as the grave," said James. "You must have been mistaken."

"Yes, may be I imagined it. My nerves are all on edge to-night. Let's go back to the library."

The hot coffee restored their confidence. James even sought the further assurance of a cigarette. The time passed ever so slowly.

"Only two o'clock," she sighed at last. "How I wish it was morning! What a quiet street the rue Byron is! I haven't heard a soul pass for over an hour."

She shivered as she went on. "I wish this apartment was on the fourth floor instead of the first."

James having finished his cigarette was beginning to fight back an increasing drowsiness.

"Wasn't the master sleeping well?" he remarked with a yawn. "It's the fresh air. That spin in the car this morning did him a power of good. My! How he enjoyed it!"

"Me too."

"I expect so. It's nearly two months since you came here, and you've scarcely been out of the house."

"I've been afraid. You don't know how I've lived in terror. I only wonder they've been so long in finding me out."

"You think they have now?"

"I'm sure. But don't let us talk of it. If Monsieur would only get better, that's what I care about most. Tell me, James,—I don't want to be curious, but you know I'm nursing him and it will help me,—how long is it since he began to drink more than he ought?"

"For twenty years he's drank off and on. His longest spell of sobriety was the War. He rose to be Major in his old regiment. Got the D.S.O. and the M.C. Was wounded twice and didn't seem to know what fear was. I thought he'd gone off the stuff for good but the moment he was free he began again. Then he certainly made up for lost time. Well, he never harmed anyone but himself."

"Ah! He has certainly harmed himself enough. He must have been a fine man once."

"He was. He's a wreck now, but he was a great athlete in his day. He's awful tough stuff, is the master, or he'd never have lasted so long. Even now he's stronger than he thinks."

"What a shame! And it does not look as if he drank from weakness. It seems as if he didn't care. Why does he do it?"

James hesitated. "I expect it's in the blood," he said cautiously. "You see, Miss, I'm speaking frankly to you

because I look on you as one of us now, and we're both fighting for the guv'nor."

"Yes, I'm grateful. Please go on."

"Well, there are two sorts in his family. There's the hard riding, hard drinking sort. He's that kind. Then there's the sanctimonious sort. His brother, Lord Strathbogie, is like that. Master and him aren't on speaking terms. Master quarrelled with his father too and would have had a hard time if an aunt hadn't made him an allowance. She died about six years ago, leaving him a fortune."

"He told me he was rich."

"Yes. He's got through a lot of it, but there's still plenty left."

"Have you been with him long?"

"I was his batman when he entered the Army, and I was with him in the late War."

"Thank you, James, for telling me so much. It's made me forget all my own fears. We'll do our best to make a fit man of him yet. . . . You're tired. I've seen you yawn twice. Well, it's three o'clock. Let's take a last look to see that all's well with him and we'll both go to bed."

So once more they tiptoed down the long passage.

"Open the door just a little, James. We only need to peep. . . ."

The door faced the bed. James pushed it a few inches and they both peered in. The moonlight still flooded the room.

"Yes, he's all right," said James in a whisper. "He hasn't even moved."

But the girl was not looking at the bed. Her eyes had gone to the window on the left, and she gripped convulsively the arm of the valet.

"Look. . . ."

James looked and stood transfixed. The frame of the window formed a semi-circle of moonlight beyond which was a small balustraded balcony. What James saw was a dark blot against the moonlight, the black silhouette of a man.

He was standing there motionless and it was evident he had not seen them. He seemed to be peering at the sleeping figure on the bed.

"Shall I go after him?" gasped James.

"No, he might fire at you. Then the shock would awake Monsieur."

She was thinking rapidly. Just inside the doorway was a light switch. Slipping her hand round to it she turned it on. In a flash the room was radiant. With a bound over the balustrade the man had gone. They heard a fall, a curse, a swift padding of feet.

"Hurry," she cried. "Get the police on the 'phone." As James rushed to do so she switched off the light again. Then, creeping to the window, she opened it and fastened the outside shutters. Peter slept peacefully.

In a few minutes they heard steps coming swiftly up the stairs; then a sudden halt, a muttering of voices. James threw open the door; an Inspector confronted them.

"We've just found a woman on the stairs, tied and gagged," he told them.

"Madame Bineau," cried James horrified.

It was indeed the housekeeper in a fainting condition. However, a little brandy brought her round. Then, half hysterically, she told her story.

"I got back about quarter to ten, after seeing my daughter that's due to have a baby next week and in a hurry, having forgotten my key. Well, to my grand surprise, the button that one pushes to light up the stairway wouldn't work. Nothing to do but go up in the dark. About half way up two men sprang on me. Two arms gripped me brutally, a big hand was over my mouth— 'Make a sound and we'll stick a knife in you,' a voice said. 'Keep still and we'll do you no harm,' said another. So I kept still, being paralysed with fear anyhow, while they bound and gagged me. Then they searched me for the key and asked me if I had it. They held an electric torch on my face. I told them I hadn't

the key, so they cursed me and went away. After that I lay there for ages it seemed, more dead than alive. . . .”

While the Inspector was taking down this statement the Hon. Peter appeared on the scene. He wore a green silk dressing gown blazoned with golden dragons. Putting up his monocle, he stared on the group.

“What the devil’s wrong in this house?”

The Inspector informed him, and the housekeeper added her tearful testimony. James and Pascaline were silent. Peter looked at them.

“Come to my room, will you?”

Sitting on his bed and smoking a cigarette, he heard their story. There was whisky beside him but he did not touch it. He listened very gravely, and, when they had done, he said:

“James, do you think you can get the car round early in the morning?”

“Yes, Sir. About eight, Sir.”

“Not any later. Go now and get a few hours’ sleep. We’ll slap what stuff we need into travelling bags, pile into the car and let her rip.”

“Where to, Sir?”

“Anywhere. Away from here. We’ll start for nowhere in particular, and just keep going. If these rascals can follow and find us they are a devilish lot smarter than I take ’em to be.”

“But are you well enough to travel, Sir?”

“Did you ever know me to fail when the pinch came? I need something like this to buck me up. Off to bed now, and at eight sharp we start for—God knows where.”

END OF BOOK ONE

BOOK TWO

PASCALINE

CHAPTER ONE

TRAVELS WITH A DIPSOMANIAC

During the three months that followed they motored over most of motorable Europe.

Their course could not have been more eccentric, their progress more spasmodic. Some days they would make a run of five hundred kilometres, others only fifty. It all depended on Peter's mood; and indeed he proved to be entirely a creature of moods and provided them with a maximum of worry.

There were times when he was stung to sobriety and at grips with his conscience. Then, as if to outspeed the devils of desire, he would take the wheel and drive like the wind. In one wild dash they would cover a prodigious distance, taking no heed of the country through which they passed, and often avoiding disaster by a hand's breadth. It was as if a madman were at the wheel. Pascaline and James, their faces tense with anxiety, exchanged apprehensive glances; but to have remonstrated with their conductor would have been to draw down a storm of wrath on their heads.

And there were other times when he would linger for days at some obscure village for no apparent reason. On these occasions he would gradually sink into a sodden state in spite of all the girl could do to restrain him. At first he would be peevish and irritable; then savage and taciturn; then suspiciously cheerful. She knew at that point that he had succumbed and that no pleading would avail. He drank steadily, but not excessively, sitting often for an hour over the same glass, and maintaining a steady level of insobriety. He would invite loafers to join him, dubious women, disreputable men. To Peter in his cups they were all charming

creatures basking in his beneficent smile. For the time he lived in a land of illusion where alcohol softened the harsh outlines and brightened the drab colours. He loved all the world—an enviable mood.

In such maudlin moments he was glad of anyone who would endure his amiable loquacity. Decent men, after the first drink, would realize his state and shrink uneasily away. His eyes were wild, his skin a hot brick colour. He would shout at people boisterously, slap them on the back, repeat himself *ad nauseam*; then sink into sullen silence. Landlords, though they liked his money, were generally glad to be rid of him.

On those public exhibitions Pascaline at first avoided him, but after seeing him sitting with a couple of women spongers, she decided to play watch-dog. So she would keep him company for long hours, her hands resting in her lap, her glass untasted on the table before her. On such occasions they seldom spoke; he (knowing why she was there) moody and secretly ashamed; she watchful but strangely happy. Many eyes were turned on them as they sat silent hour after hour;—Peter lean, well groomed, in a suit of Harris tweed; his bold, sharp face brick red, his blue eyes with a wildish expression, his grey hair smooth and lustrous; Pascaline tall and slight, her gleamy black hair hidden under a toque, her pale cheeks mildly hollowed, the sweetness of her lips accentuated by a mournful expression, sorrowful depths in the darks of her eyes. No doubt many speculated as to the relationship between them.

But there came a day when such persistent tippling told its tale. It was his harassed heart that betrayed him. He would lean forward gripping the table, the veins swelling on his temples, his pale eyes staring with an awful look.

“My heart’s galloping like a bronco,” he would say. “Presently it’ll begin to buck, then stand rigid. It’s that I dread. Look out for me. . . . Ah! . . .”

He would fall back choking, his eyes glaring horribly,

sweat pricking out on his brow. It made her heart ache to watch him. She carried some capsules which at such moments she broke on his lips. He was always very sick afterwards. She would have to nurse him, but in doing so something like real happiness came to her. He was hers then,—like a child: helpless, repentant, pathetically anxious to please. As soon as he felt strong enough they would start once more on their travels, but at frequent intervals she had to give him stimulants. They motored through Germany into Switzerland; then by way of Austria down to Italy; and it is hardly too much to say that their trail might have been traced by empty brandy bottles.

From Naples they journeyed North along the coast to the French Riviera. As they went on, Peter's bouts with John Barleycorn grew less violent, his spells of sickness more prolonged. He was fast breaking up and he realized it. He made no more efforts to regain his grip. It was all very discouraging, very disheartening. Both James and the girl had moments of actual despair, but neither for a moment thought of shirking.

"How's it all going to end?" she said to James one evening. Peter had been worse than usual. They were in a small hillside hotel above Mentone, and she had sought the terrace for a breath of air. Her eyes were red with weeping.

"I don't know," said James bleakly. "But we can't do more than we're doing. We've just got to carry on."

"If it was only his heart it would be plain sailing," she continued. "People with weak hearts often live longest, because they take such care of themselves. But he won't take any care of himself at all. Seems indifferent whether he lives or not."

"I believe he is," said James gravely.

"But why, why?"

James looked at her thoughtfully. A common sympathy had drawn these two together, creating a fine confidence between them.

"It seems to me," persisted the girl, "that it isn't all hereditary. Something terrible in his past life must have set him off like that, something that shook him to the very base of his being. I almost wish it were that. I could pity him more, be more devoted."

"You couldn't be more devoted than you are, Miss."

"Oh yes, I could. There are times when I revolt, when he is horrid to me. He speaks roughly, orders me away. Of course he's awfully sorry afterwards, and I know it's only the drink in him; but it hurts, it wounds. Still, even if he struck me, it would not matter. I would do anything for him."

"I know," said James slowly. "I don't know what we'd do without you, Miss. It seems as if you're one of us. . . . Well, may be I ought to tell you. . . . There *was* something."

"Ah! I was sure of it. But please don't tell me if you think I'd better not know."

"On the contrary, Miss, you'd better know. . . . It was one of those things one doesn't like to speak of, not even think of; but they happen, that's the hell of it, they happen. . . ."

"Go on."

"It was when he was quite young and it fairly knocked him off his balance. You see, he got married when he was twenty-three, surprising us all. But she was a lovely girl and he'd known her for years. Fine old family too. Everyone pleased. It was a perfect match and I never saw two young folks so happy. When he was ordered out to India with his regiment of course she went with him. Then a little girl came and made everything still more lovely. I was their orderly, and when the kiddy got to be big enough I used to play with her of an evening. . . ."

James was silent a little. He took out an empty pipe and began to suck at it furiously.

"The child was three years old when the gov'nor was or-

dered to take charge of a frontier station and his wife begged to accompany him. He wasn't in favour of it, as we were having a lot of trouble with native tribes at the time; but she pleaded, and as they were both very much in love, in the end he gave in. They had a nice bungalow and for a time everything was well. Then . . ."

"Yes, what happened?"

"Well, he was sent unexpectedly on a punitive expedition and, while he was away his wife and child were . . . murdered in their beds."

"Oh no! . . ." She was staring at James, silent with horror.

"Yes, by the marks round their necks, strangled. Some thug must have crept in noiselessly. The sentry heard nothing. No one ever knew who did it, but surely it was an act of revenge."

"Poor lady! Poor little child!"

"Aye, and poor guv'nor! He didn't show much emotion—took it like a man of stone. I got back with him and I recollect I was more moved than he seemed to be. But he resigned from the army at once, dropped out of civilization. I think he went into the heart of Abyssinia. After a bit he came home and, as I was free again, I joined him. I've been with him ever since."

"And that was how it all began?"

"Yes. The guv'nor never mentioned their names from that moment to this; but I'll bet there's not a single day of his life he doesn't think of them. At first he drank only to forget; but in the end, being in his blood as it were, it got him. Well, that's the story, Miss, and you're the first I ever told it to."

"I'm glad you did. I can make allowance for everything now."

For a long time she remained there, staring into the starry night. Below her was the glittering sweep of the jewelled coast, the olive gardens glooming to the sea. So

much beauty if one had only the heart to enjoy it! She was aroused by the Cathedral bell proclaiming the hour and hurried in to give Peter his medicine. He was fast breaking up and realized it, for after a little he said to her:

"I'm at the contrition stage, my dear. It's the last time I'm going to make a fool of myself. But I say that every time, don't I? You know, I wonder you stick it. I'm a brute often. Well, it can't go on much longer. You'll be well rid of me one of these days."

"Please don't talk like that."

"Yes, I've got to get that fact clear in my booze-addled brain. My time's drawing near. After all, my heart's a bit to blame, don't you think? It makes such an infernal racket I can't forget it. It beats in the tips of my fingers, it beats in the back of my head, it beats even on my eyelids. Confound my devil of a heart. It won't let me forget it. The only way I can forget it is to get stewed."

Sadly he stared out of the open window, over the starlit sea. It was mid-July and the heat was devastating. His face was pale now, with great pouches under the eyes, and his gaze had the clear, empty stare of the cardiac.

"May be I shouldn't reproach my poor devil of a heart, though. It's been mighty long suffering. I once had to kill a favourite charger. Its leg was broken; nothing to do but shoot it. I'll never forget those big liquid eyes looking at me as I drew my service revolver. . . . Well, sometimes I've thought it would be a mercy to still the sufferings of my heart in the same way—the bullet way. . . . Oh, don't worry, my dear. I'll never do it. I'll play the game."

His pyjama jacket was soaked with sweat and he threw it off petulantly. To change the subject she asked:

"What's that scar on your left shoulder?"

"Claw of a Lybian lioness."

"And that on your right arm?"

"Boche bayonet, I think. I've so many scars I forget how I got 'em. I've had some devilish close shaves. Ah! my

dear, I've never feared death. It's only life I've feared. . . ."

She watched him anxiously. His frame was emaciated, his eyes widely sad, almost spiritual; his strong hewn face like a wedge.

"But I can't stand this infernal heat," he went on. I think I'll be well enough in a day or two to take to the road again. I want to get where the wind is cool and the country green; not parched and grilled as it is here. We'll strike North once more. We'll go by easy stages and I assure you I won't drive. My days of driving are over. I'll go slow on the booze too, I promise you. I'll give myself every chance. I'll do just what you tell me. I'm going to be good now, because I feel it's my last lap."

So they zigzagged by way of the Basses Pyrenees to Biarritz, then up to Bordeaux. From there they went to Brest and skirted the wild coast of Finistère. Every day Peter seemed to grow weaker. He huddled in the car like an old man, but sometimes a particularly savage and beautiful bit of coast would kindle a flash in his lack-lustre eye. The action of the car kept him from feeling the action of his heart, and the pure air made his breathing easier.

"When I enter a room," he would say, "it's as if a paving stone was dropped on my chest. When I lie down at night I have an awful feeling, just as if a coffin lid was being screwed down on me. I suffocate. Sometimes I spend half the night sitting up."

One late afternoon they were driving gently along a lonely road when he gripped her hand.

"I feel I'm going to have another fainting spell. It's coming down on me—blackness. Wave after wave of velvety blackness. Even the sunlight's black. . . ."

"Is there nowhere we can take him, James?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know," said James. "The village we passed had

no hotel, only a sort of auberge. There's a larger village about ten kilometres further on."

"That's too far. We must stop very soon."

At that moment they were running alongside a very high grey wall. About midway, set in it, was a huge gateway with gates of heavy oak. There was a small door in one of these gates. The place looked like some sort of a sanatorium, a convent even; at least a residence where privacy is desired. On one of the tall gate-posts was painted dimly the name: CASTEL BLANC.

"Let's stop here," she said.

James pulled a cord by the side of the gate and a bell jangled wildly. A sore eyed man in shirt sleeves came out.

"There's no one living here," he said wheezily. "The house is furnished and has always been to let, but now it's for sale. Don't you want to buy it, Monsieur? It's a splendid property, and cheap, incredibly cheap."

In his manner there was a curious eagerness, but at the time they did not notice it. Peter looked up wearily.

"How much is it?" he asked.

"A hundred thousand francs."

"Well, I can't go any further," said Peter closing his eyes. "Buy the damned house, James. I expect it's as good a place to die in as anywhere."

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOUSE THAT WAS TOO CHEAP

"Just like the gov'nor," grumbled James, "to go and buy right off the reel a house he's never seen."

"He probably thought that if he saw it he'd never buy it," commented Pascaline. "But is it really bought?"

"Yes. Papers signed this morning. Quick work. They

seemed mighty anxious to rush the sale. Afraid, no doubt, he'd change his mind. Come to think of it, it's funny how keen they were to sell. They say it's cheap. Costs about fifteen hundred pounds at the present rate of exchange. Well, opinions differ; but if you ask me, it would be dear at any price."

"You don't like it?"

"There's something about it that gives me the shivers. I had a nightmare the first night I slept in it. Not to speak of there being no modern improvements—no electricity, hot water, central heating. And I'm sure the plumbing's primæval. There's a musty smell of age and decay. And no garage. I have to put the Rolls-Royce in a stable. Mouldy old barn, I call it."

"I think what attracted Monsieur was the high wall. It seemed to shut out the world."

"Yes, and shut us in. Prison wall, it makes me think of."

"But there's calm and quiet behind it, and that's what he wants most. You know, he's slept better since we came here than he's done for months. I'm giving him a milk diet, and what with that and the repose he's actually beginning to take an interest in things. Peace and rest, that's what he wants. They may work wonders. Ah, if we could only hope!"

"Well, if it's doing the gov'nor good," said James, "I've nothing to say. But that don't change my idea that it's a rambling old barracks."

However, he was scarcely justified in his dislike to the house. It had qualities of spaciousness and dignity. It was rectangular with a low roof. There was not a curve anywhere, and it was severely devoid of ornament; but its very plainness was pleasing because it emphasized its balance and proportion. It presented a flat façade of two stories, with a low terrace running the entire length. There was no balustrade to this terrace and it was reached by three broad steps situated midway. Opposite these steps was the double

front door and, equi-distant on either side, were large, low windows. On the second story were windows to correspond with an extra one above the door.

The house had been built of the rough stone of the country and faced with cement to give it a smooth surface. It had at some time been painted white, but was now a depressing grey. However, in the sunlight, in its setting of dark foliage, it had still an effect of whiteness. Trees elbowed it, except in front, where there was a circular lawn. Altogether it was a house of character, with a quiet, inscrutable quality that rather repelled than attracted.

No sooner were they installed than the question of servants arose. The local agent who sold the house had arranged with a good dame of the nearby village to come daily and do their cooking. Madame Marteau, wife of the cobbler of Tremorac, was a white-haired, grey-moustached grenadier of a woman with a grim mouth and malicious eyes. She proved to be an excellent plain cook, the plainer the better. Her omelettes would have roused the envy of a Parisian chef, while her *soupe aux choux* could not have been improved on. But alas! she told them they could not count on her remaining.

"There's Marteau," she said, "always grumbling because I'm not there to look after him. And I'm too old to do this for a steady thing, what with varicose veins and a floating kidney. No, I'll stay a few weeks, but it's only to oblige."

"Well, we'll just have to look out for someone else," said James to Pascaline. "We want a housemaid too. I don't know what we're going to do about that."

"Can't you get one at Tremorac?"

"Can't get anything at Tremorac. It's the most discouraging place I ever saw. Half a hundred houses and a so-called hotel known as 'The White Goat.' Inside there's a long table scarred with knives, and two benches; labourers

and drovers sipping bowls of cider; the patron, Monsieur Crabineau, a skinny, sour-faced man who shaves only on Sundays. Buying him a couple of drinks, I tackled him. 'A maid, is it?' says he, rasping his chin. 'I'll see what I can do.'

"So he sends out and pretty soon there comes in a buxom looking wench. I informed her what the work was and what we wanted to pay, and she nodded as if she was as pleased as Punch. But when I told her where it was, she looked at me with a scared expression.—'No, if it's the White House, I don't want to go.' Then she backed out, leaving me bewildered.

" 'What's wrong?' I asked Monsieur Crabineau.

"He scratched his head, looking uncomfortable. 'I don't know,' he said in a queer way.

" 'If it's money,' I went on, 'I don't mind paying. You told me a hundred a month was a good wage round here, but I'll give you twice that if need be.'

"He said he'd do his best, but I've been to see him every day since, and he's not found anyone yet. So this very morning I asked him: 'What's the matter, they all refuse to come to Castel Blanc?'—'Well,' he began, looking a bit embarrassed, 'they say it's so lonely, so shut in. They don't mind the work, and the pay's good; but it's *trop triste*.'

"There! That's all I could get out of him. Now, what are we going to do? We've got to have a girl to keep all these big rooms in order. And cook's another problem. Mother Marteau says positively she's going next week."

"Can't we get help from Paris?"

James laughed scornfully. "I can see a Parisian maid down here. No gas, no electricity, no cinema, no dancing. All that big black Breton furniture that gives one the hump. No, Miss, you couldn't get them to stay here for any money."

"What about trying one of the country towns near us?"

"That's what I was thinking. I'll go right away."

So James motored over to Lamballe and returned with a country lass, strong, rosy, sensible-looking.

"I picked her from a bunch," he said triumphantly. "Annaik they call her. I think she's just what we want."

Cheerfully the girl set to work to keep the great, gaunt rooms in order. They were furnished in the Breton style with monastic simplicity. There were huge heavy wardrobes of age-blackened oak, and sideboards with racks of picturesque plates and cups that hung on hooks. The walls were white-washed, making the lofty rooms look even more spacious, and the massive furniture more sombre still. There were no carpets, but the old flooring could be rubbed to a mirror-like polish.

Pascaline left the management of the house entirely to James and devoted herself to her patient. There was a wonderful improvement in Peter. Although so far he had been confined to his room, he was beginning to show signs of energy. He asked questions about the house, and even wanted to see a daily paper. There was a notable change in his morale, and she sought with all her power to put fresh courage into him. She had been reading a good deal on the subject of the heart and knew just how she should proceed. Her fatigue was forgotten in her joy at his progress.

One afternoon he was sleeping peacefully. He had the big room over the doorway, and the open window let in the sunshine and fresh air. There was a view of tree-tops just ruffling in the caress of the breeze. The sunlight half filled the lofty chamber, whose size gave it an aspect of dignity. There was an enormous wardrobe, a four-post bed, an uncomfortable chair or two. The room was a contrast in black and white, and to make it more effective she had hung on the wall just over the bed a cross of oak so old it was riddled with worm holes.

Just under the cross lay Peter, breathing softly. His silver-grey hair caught a glint of sun, and his strong fea-

tured face wore a look of repose. The lines scored by sickness seemed less decided, and the sharpness softened. Perhaps this was only the effect of the light; but in any case happily imagining she left him.

She wanted a change from the sick room. Although they had been there nearly two weeks, she had not yet ventured beyond the terrace. She feared to be out of call. Now things were going so well she thought she might take an hour of liberty.

Yes, she would explore a little of this mysterious domain into which chance had so capriciously projected them.

CHAPTER THREE

PASCALINE EXPLORES

Her first observation was that there was no garden to this strange house. With the exception of the lawn in front, the grounds were garrisoned by unruly trees. Underneath them a tangle of shrubbery grew in savage abandon. It seemed as if there had never been any effort to order or confine the prodigal growth, as if whoever had lived there had desired an effect of primitive wildness. Or was it because the place had been neglected so long? In any case the trees had pushed year by year, till now they lifted themselves high above the house itself, forming a mat of verdure that obscured all view and threatened in time to engulf it entirely.

On three sides the grounds were surrounded by that gloomy grey wall; on the fourth they were bounded by a steep cliff that faced the sea. It was this cliff the girl now tried to reach, but it was not so easy. After taking several false paths in that jungle of undergrowth, she found one that seemed to have a definite goal. Though it was narrow

and overgrown in places, she made good progress and, after going about a hundred yards, came on a little round tower. She was curious to enter; but the door was locked, so on she went. The trail circled the tower; then the trees stood back to form a gap, and there the girl paused, entranced.

She was standing on the verge of a cliff about fifty feet high, looking down on a vast brown plateau of sand. In front of her it stretched as far as she could see. She could not distinguish the precise point on the horizon where it ceased, for the brown became grey, the grey a glimmering blue. Set in the blue were fantastic rocks and bronze-green islets, with beyond glimpses of opaline horizon. The sands, she thought, must extend for miles, and seemed flat as a floor. How the sea must gallop over them when the tide turned!

On either hand the land swung out to form a mighty bay. To the left the sands gave way to marshes that in turn yielded to sloping fields. These fields were broken by patches of verdure and rose to a ridge on which three wind-mills etched themselves against the sky. She could also see the point of a spire which must belong to the church of Tremorac.

To the right the sands were checked by stubborn cliffs, broken by tiny coves. Grey as the rocks was a cluster of houses about two miles away. It huddled behind the hump of a hill as if for shelter from the sea winds. Below it, curving out on the sand, was an arm of masonry that ended in a lamp tower; and in its shelter a score of boats lay tilted. This, she thought, must be the fishing village of Auberon.

Below her, on the face of the cliff, rough steps were cut. Other descent there was none. A rust-rotted gate barred the way, but after some difficulty she succeeded in opening it.

When she had descended the precarious steps, she turned and looked up. Everywhere the cliff dropped abruptly to the sand, indeed in places beetled over it. The trees pressed closely to its very edge, and clutched the rocks like tentacles.

Chiefly oak and pine, their heavy foliage made a shadow on the shingle below.

Just beyond this shadow were silver sand and golden sunshine. From below, the cliff formed a promontory that melted into meadow lands. It was, she thought, like the blunt prow of a great galleon with foliage for sails. Profoundly peaceful now, how magnificent it must be in a storm!

Sitting on the shingle, clasping her knees, she stared at the far horizon. What a sense of freedom, of escape! The foliage behind her was so dark and saturnine, and where the grim cliff ended the grey wall began. Yes, the White House was effectively shut in, a veritable prison. Gratefully her eyes went to the wide horizon, and greedily she drew in the pure breath of the sea. . . .

How like a dream it was! But all her life had been like a dream,—too often, alas! a *cauchemar*. There was her father, journalist when sober, poet when drunk, a handsome, irresponsible Irishman who had sadly neglected his little girl. Callie O'Neill she was then, playing in the Luxembourg and going to the communal school. They had a box-like apartment in the Rue Notre Dames des Champs. At first there had been a house-keeper, but when the girl was ten she was doing the work herself, cooking her father's supper when it pleased him to come home. He would sometimes bring fellow-journalists to smoke and drink and yarn. They petted and spoiled her, making up for her father's neglect. On the whole, however, she was sad and anxious, and her position was rather a perilous one.

Then her reckless father dropped dead in the street on his way home from a dinner. How well she remembered the funeral, followed by a shabby Bohemian mob; then days of emptiness and weeping. Her mother she never remembered. Her father would never talk of her mother, so she supposed there had been trouble between them. In the midst of her mourning Spirelli appeared.

Her next memory was of the convent where she had spent

six long years. It was in the east of the city, a huge rambling building with a vast garden shut in by high walls. It was like a green island against which washed vainly the waves of sordid humanity. Yet she hated it. After the too great freedom she had always known, it was like a prison to her. She detested the discipline, the sour faces of the Sisters, the severe repression. And her hate extended to the man who had put her there. So began her first antagonism to Spirelli.

Yet the convent was the best thing that could have happened to her. She saw that now. Its Spartan training taught her to endure. Every morning they were up by five, and in the evening in bed by seven. The food was of the plainest, but they were made to eat it. Their lives had a machine-like regularity, and there was no coddling. Physically they were hardened, mentally they were humbled. They were told of the vanity of the world and of their own sinfulness. They wore ugly, ill-fitting gowns and had their hair drawn straight back. When once a week they walked out in long procession they were forbidden to look at a male.

Well, no doubt it was all for the best; but during those six years how she loathed it. Then one day Spirelli came and took her away. She was a young woman now, shy and rather religious. The teachings of the Sisters had impressed her more than she had imagined. At first she almost wanted to go back to the peace of the convent, but soon the fascinating spectacle of the world again captured her.

And what a world it was! What a plunge from serene isolation to the welter of cosmopolitan society, to the change and confusion of travel! . . . Yet none of it could vie in fantasy to this last wild flight and her fight for the life of a drunkard. That was the strangest of all. . . .

Back there in a black and white room a grey-haired man slept peacefully under the shadow of a cross. Here on the shingle, in the pensive sunshine, a slim, dark girl clasped her knees and stared at the far horizon. In the *bas-fonds* of

Paris three apaches brooded over their absinthe with thoughts of revenge. . . . And incongruous though it all seemed, the fates of these people were interwoven and part of that great pattern, Life.

She was not afraid of those men any more. Indeed she rarely thought of them. She had a power of forgetting the past as if it had never existed. A merciful gift, maybe.

Only remained Spirelli. Spirelli she could never forget. He had saturated her life too strongly with his personality. He had done too much to mould her. In a sense Spirelli lived in her.

Peter, sleeping up there—what was he to her? She could not tell yet. What was she to him? A nurse, faithful, devoted. As long as he needed her she would never leave him. She would follow him, devote herself to him, always—if he wanted her.

She knew she was beautiful. She was tall and slender; her features were moulded with delicacy and exquisite in their clear-cut proportion. Her eyes were profoundly deep and dark. On their travels she had seen men look at her with admiration, women with envy. . . .

At this point in her meditations she shivered a little and realized that the air was getting chilly. Yet she would reconnoitre a bit further, she decided. So she rose and walked along the beach to the right. Soon she came to a slanting dyke built of massive slabs of stone, which protected green meadows from the sea. She descended the dyke on the side of the meadows.

After crossing several fields she was halted by a dense coppice. It was fenced about with barbed wire, and seemed quite a fascinating place. There were leafy hollows and miniature ravines, all very wild and charming. After walking some way around it, she came to a place where, through a rift in the trees, she could just make out the top of a turret. Somehow the sight baffled and intrigued her. She wanted to see more of that house of which she could only

get a glimpse of the topmost tower. But the barbed wire encircled the dense plantation and the wildwood was discreetly still.

"Who is our neighbour?" she wondered.

Then, suddenly she felt uneasy and hurriedly retraced her steps. A dark cloud had stealthily obscured the sky. Over the yellow sands swept a purple shadow that was like a shudder. The foliage on the cliff top had darkened till it looked down with an evil frown. All at once the scene had become strangely desolate. A sense of fatality came over her and, with it, a presentiment of evil. On she hurried, up the steps, through the rusted gate, along the tangled path beneath the rank, dank undergrowth. As she did so, she had the feeling of entering a prison.

On reaching the front of the house she ran into James and his face startled her. The touch of colour faded from her cheeks, her heart beat sickeningly.

"Is it Monsieur?" she gasped.

"No, he's all right," said James impatiently. "Sleeping like a blooming babe."

"Then, what is it?"

"It's the maid, Annaik. She's skipped, cleared out, left us in the soup. Wouldn't say why. Wouldn't wait for her wages. Just bolted. The carrier's coming to-night to get her box."

"But why?"

"The devil knows. It's mighty curious."

"I expect she found it too dull. She was young and pretty, you know."

"Well," said James grimly, "the next one won't be young and pretty. She'll be old and gritty."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to town bright and early to-morrow morning to pick out the toughest bird I can find. But it's funny all the same. I can't make it out."

CHAPTER FOUR

MADAME MARTEAU EXPLAINS

On the morning that James made his trip to town to fetch a new maid, Pascaline thought she would improve the occasion by getting on more familiar terms with Madame Marteau. She found the cook in her kitchen, engaged in skinning a rabbit. After the usual courtesies she asked:

"By the way, Madame Marteau, who is it stays in the house to the right, in the middle of a thick grove?"

"Ah, the château."

"Oh, it's a château, then."

"But yes, Mam'selle. The oldest and finest château in the country. It belongs to the de Marsacs."

"Who are they?"

"An ancient family of nobles. They used to be rich. It's said they owned all the land hereabouts. Grand Seigneurs, they were. But now they've got to work for their living like the rest of us."

"Indeed. Do they live there?"

"Oh no. There's only one left, and he's absent nearly all the time. May be you've heard of him. He took for his profession the law, and they say in Paris he was a great one to defend criminals."

"Not Maitre de Marsac?"

"That's him, but he's Judge de Marsac now. The last Government made him President of the Assise Court at Rennes. So, instead of defending criminals, he passes his time in sentencing them."

"Does he come down here sometimes?"

"Only in November for the shooting. You know, there's splendid duck-shooting over the flats and he loves it. They say he's a very brilliant man, the youngest Judge in all France."

"And is the house empty just now?"

"Oh no. There's an old man and woman, servants of the family, who live there and take care of it."

"Have we any other interesting neighbours? I mean out of the ordinary."

"Well, there's Doctor Chavas. He lives in a house near Auberon. You can see it. It stands on the point of a cliff. He was a surgeon in the Navy and spent a long time in China. A queer man. He won't practise any more. Sends the people away when they try to see him. Nobody likes him. He makes experiments on animals, and he has a Chinese servant who can't speak. They say the Doctor cut out his tongue on purpose."

"How horrible!"

Mother Marteau grinned. She had three yellow teeth in front and she showed every one of them. The effect was disagreeable.

"Yes," she went on with evident unction; "I could tell you lots of funny things about the people here. Now there's the Abbé Grégoire. They call him the Black Abbé. They say he's a regular satyr. . . . But there! I hear the auto. I have no doubt it brings the new maid. Well, I hope Mam'selle will have someone to serve supper this evening."

"Tell me," said the girl quickly, "why did Annaik leave so suddenly?"

But Madame Marteau only replied with that malicious smile that was like a grimace, and shrugged her shoulders.

The new maid, whom James triumphantly presented, could neither have been reproved for youth nor reproached for beauty. She was a sour-faced spinster, who answered to the name of Ambrosine. She had been a maid all her adult life, and her ambition was to save enough to retire to a home for elderly women. Unfortunately her tart temper did not allow her to hold any place very long. She had, however, admirable qualities of industry and honesty. After some sniffing at the absence of modern conveniences, she accepted

the situation, and quickly settled down to her new duties.

"It will be all right," said James hopefully, "if only she gets along with the cook."

"I don't think Madame Marteau's easy to get along with."

"A dangerous woman," said James solemnly. "I often wonder if she was responsible for Annaik going so suddenly. You know, I rather liked Annaik."

"Did you? Perhaps that's why Madame Marteau didn't."

James looked startled. "Well," he said, "I think Ambrosine can hold her own. She looks decidedly vinegarish. I expect she'll stick it."

"I bet Madame Marteau will outstay her. You know, I should be afraid to dismiss her. She has an evil tongue, I think, and would say dreadful things about us if we made an enemy of her. If ever she goes, it will be of her own accord."

"Anyway, she's a good cook," said James; "and so long as she doesn't poison us it's not me that's going to give her the sack. Heaven knows it's hard enough to get help at all in this God-forsaken place. I never saw such a sour, surly people. They look at you with distrust and would cheat you for a *sou*."

"I know. They're pure Bretons, a dour, uncouth race. . . . Well, I sadly fear, my poor James, Mother Marteau and your Ambrosine will never pull together. You'll soon see there's trouble ahead."

But two days passed and between the maid and the cook no apparent hostility developed. James and Pascaline were beginning to congratulate themselves. Everything was going beautifully. The problem of domestic help triumphantly solved. Then on the third day Ambrosine disappeared as suddenly and surreptitiously as Annaik had done.

It was in the evening when they discovered it. Mother Marteau had gone home to her drunken husband, and James wanted to give some instructions about early breakfast. He called Ambrosine, but there was no reply. He went up to

her room, then descended looking a picture of dismay.

"It's empty," he said. "She's flown the coop. Skipped, bag and baggage. She hadn't much, only a basket valise. She must have packed it on her back. Gone, and not even a hair pin to point to her presence."

"I thought she looked funny when she served dinner. Whatever does it mean?"

"Sure the place is bewitched," declared James. "Now, there was a woman who thought of nothing but money. To lose even two days' wages would break her heart, but off she goes all the same. The old ones are not more reliable than the young ones in this funny house. Well, I might as well get a good-looker next time. I'm off to town first thing in the morning. We'll try our luck once more."

It seemed as if James delighted to go to extremes, for he returned the next day looking more than pleased with himself.

"This is Augusta," he announced.

Augusta was really a bit of a beauty. She had a full-blown figure with blooming cheeks, a bold beaming eye and lips that might have lured an anchorite.

"Lucious creature, isn't she?"

"Too good-looking to be good," said Pascaline. "Did you see her references?"

James looked a little sheepish. "No, she said she'd lost them. I took a chance."

"There must be something wrong. May be she's not honest."

"Devil a lot she could steal in this rotten old house," said James.

"Then, it must be her moral character."

"Sure you don't expect a handsome girl like that to have a moral character," said James.

"Well, I can't think of anything else. We must await developments."

They did not have to wait very long. The following day

at dinner Augusta seemed queer. Her eyes had a dreamy look, and several times she fixed them languishingly on James. Her cheeks glowed, her actions were notably erratic. Suddenly she dropped a plate; then, bending over to pick it up, she herself collapsed. James hastened to assist her to rise, at which she clung to him affectionately.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the outraged James, "the woman's intoxicated."

Then Augusta tried to kiss him.

"Back, wretched creature!" cried James, repulsing her. "This is too bad. You cannot remain in this house. Go up to your room now. You can sleep here to-night, but to-morrow you must go."

Augusta scorned became an indignant Augusta, with a fury that seemed to sober her.

"Go to-morrow, is it?" she shrilled. "No, I'll go to-night. I wouldn't stay another hour under this roof if you was to give me a thousand francs. Nice people you are indeed to lure a poor girl into a place like this with a high wage. If I'd known what it was I'd never have set foot over the doorstep. Stay in this house another night, this horrible house, —never! I'm going now."

They heard her stumbling up to her room.

"Whatever does she mean?"

"I don't know. We must ask her."

Very soon she came down, her hat a little awry, her mantle donned in haste.

"I'm off," she flung at them. "I'll send for my box in the morning."

She was flouncing away when James stopped her.

"Wait a moment, please Augusta. What was it you were saying about the house? What's the matter with the house?"

"Oh, you're very innocent, you are," sneered the girl.

"I assure you we are," said Pascaline. "Won't you please explain?"

The face of Augusta expressed amazement.

"Don't tell me you don't know!"

"Indeed we don't."

"Well, for the love of God! Don't you know what they call this house?"

"No."

"Why, they call it the 'House of Fear.'"

"But why?"

"Because no one will stay in it. Because everyone's afraid."

"Why should they be?"

"Oh, I see you know nothing. Well, I tell you I'm afraid to stay in it. I tell you it's a cursed house. It's a house of *murder*."

"What!"

"Yes, half a dozen people have been killed here, assassinated in that very room the master's sleeping in now. You didn't know that, did you? Everyone else knows it but you. That was why they were so keen to sell it to you. That was why you got the place so cheap. 'These fools of foreigners' they call you. No one else would buy it. Can you wonder, then, to cheer her heart a poor girl took a drop too much?"

Augusta began to weep hysterically.

"All right, my girl," said James soothingly. "I'll send your trunk in the morning. I'm not really blaming you. Thanks for telling us."

The maid went away, leaving them gazing blankly at each other. Of the two James seemed the more impressed.

"I knew something was wrong with the place," he said gloomily. "I felt it in my bones. Well, we must get out of here right away."

"Impossible. Your master isn't fit to be moved."

"Then the very moment he *is* fit; and the sooner the better."

"James, you know him better than I; do you think he'd go for that reason?"

"I don't believe he would," admitted James.

"Madame Marteau must know all about it."

"Yes, I'll tackle her in the morning."

"Good. Please let me be with you when you do. I'm curious to hear what she says."

Next morning the cook was in her place as usual, but her eyes were perhaps a little more malicious, and her smile more decidedly a grin. She did not wait to be questioned.

"So, you've lost Augusta," she cackled. "She spent the night at the White Goat, drinking with two drovers. I knew she wouldn't stay long. None of 'em will. Only old Mother Marteau stays. She's the faithful one."

"Why did you never tell us about the house, Madame Marteau?" asked Pascaline.

"Eh, what about the house?"

"Well, Augusta told us there have been half a dozen murders committed here."

The old dame laughed shrilly. "It isn't true. There were only two. But it was none of my affair to tell you. I does my work and minds my own business."

"Will you please tell us about the murders now?"

"Sure I will. Was I not working here the same as I am now? The first was an old American lady. She rented the place because she wanted to be quiet. The second was a young French artist. He wanted to be quiet too. Well, they were both mighty quiet in the end. Found dead in their beds. It was done in the night."

"But what was the motive?"

"No one knows. Not robbery. The American lady had jewels but they weren't taken. The young artist had money but it wasn't touched. My! their bodies were mutilated something horrible. Carved and cut all over. Why, their tripes were tied round their necks in lover's knots. . . ."

"Oh no!" cried Pascaline.

"Please spare us those sickening details," came from James.

"And did no one find any trace of the assassin?"

"No one. Not to this day. Ah, the nice silver-haired old lady she was, so gentle she wouldn't have harmed a fly. And the young artist, such a fine, handsome gentleman. . . . It does seem a shame, doesn't it?"

Satisfied with the effect she had produced, Madame Marteau went on with her work of disembowling a chicken. Her hands were covered with blood, and she looked at them with her malicious, enigmatic smile.

"Isn't it terrible!" gasped James. "And all this time to think of the gov'nor lying in the very room, sleeping like a blessed infant."

As he said this, the eyes of the old woman went past and beyond him, staring at the doorway with a startled expression.

It was Peter, clad in pyjamas and dressing gown. He looked weak and shaky, but his eye was clear, his face calm. He put up his monocle.

"I've finished with sleep for a bit," he declared cheerfully. "I think I've slumbered enough to last me for the remainder of my brief life. And now, enlighten me—who is this charming old creature, and what the devil is all this fuss about?"

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ABBÉ GRÉGOIRE EXHORTS

"I should warn you," said Peter, "that occasionally I have been addicted to spells of temperance, and I expect this is one of them."

They were sitting on the lawn in the pale sunshine. With

his fur coat over his shoulders he stretched in a long chair, while opposite him Pascaline bent over a piece of needle work.

"Pray Heaven it lasts," said the girl.

"It probably will, for a while; perhaps even for the few fleeting months that remain to me. I shall fade away like a flower, blessing you and breathing defiance to the demon Rum."

"Don't be foolish. If only you don't drink you'll live as long as any of us. How is your heart?"

"The little beast's been behaving pretty decently lately. I actually have moments when I am scarcely aware of its existence."

"Of course. If you only keep quiet and take care of yourself again, you'll be all right."

"By Jove! I wonder. You know, I do feel amazingly better since we came here. I'm beginning to demand again how wags the world. When we first arrived all I wanted to do was to turn my face to the wall and die. How long is it since?"

"Three weeks."

"So long. Well, this place is ideal for a rest cure. I believe when I die I'll endow it as a Home for Inebriates. What about the problem of domestic help? Is it solved?"

"Madame Marteau brings with her a young woman who acts as chambermaid, but who goes home at night. The arrangement works all right."

"They're afraid to sleep here, aren't they, on account of the murders?"

"Yes. Why won't you let me change your room?"

"Bless you, my child, not for the world. In my eyes it lends a piquant charm to the room. Really, I don't want to swank, but I'm afraid of nothing, natural or supernatural. Entire absence of imagination, I suppose. But you,—you lock your door at night."

"Yes. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of I don't know what."

"Ah! Perhaps some day if I keep on getting better and better you'll be locking it on account of me."

Her face flushed. "No, I should trust you. I know you would always behave like a gentleman."

"Would I? Well, yes, I suppose I should. After all I'm a cold-blooded Britisher. Sex is beastly, Nature disgusting. . . . But now we approach the matter, let us discuss frankly the problem of our future relationship. We don't love one another, do we?"

"Of course not."

"You seem very positive, but no doubt you speak for yourself. However, let us suppose we don't. If we did, we might marry as soon as you get your divorce. Indeed we might marry on a lukewarm affection if any useful purpose could be served by it. But, as far as I can see, there's none. How old are you, my dear?"

"Twenty-three."

"I'm more than double that, old enough to be your father. The paternal relationship seems to me to be the most appropriate. I shall be your adopted parent, or better still, your adopted uncle. Will you call me Uncle Peter?"

"If you wish."

"Then that's settled. You know, my dear, you're a beautiful girl. I fear that some day you're going to be a source of anxiety to your poor old uncle. As I look at you I begin to realize the responsibility I have assumed. By the way, what about our charming apache friends in Paris? Are you still afraid of them?"

"No, I rarely think of them."

"And the sinister Spirelli?"

"I often think of him."

"Are you afraid he'll find you out?"

"He will."

"Ah no. I must live long enough to put you in a place of safety. How would it be if I bought a little island in the

South Seas and we went there? He would find it difficult to reach us."

"He would follow us."

"What a formidable fellow! You know, your Spirelli interests me. I rather hope I may meet him some day."

Pascaline seemed anxious to change the subject. "Have you a revolver?" she asked suddenly.

"I possess, I believe, a 38 automatic, but recently James seems to have developed an affection for it. Poor fellow! He's lost his nerve. You notice how thin he's getting."

"Yes, there's something about this house that affects him morbidly. He says there's a curse on it, and that evil will happen to all that live here. The 'House of Fear' one of our maids called it."

Peter turned his head and surveyed that white façade, so inscrutable in the mild sunshine.

"Seems to me a gentle, homely old place. I'm sorry for you people, all nerves and imagination. Just look . . . it's like a placid-faced old lady sunning herself."

"No, no," she said with sudden feeling. "See the windows,—how black they are, like eyes in a skull. The house seems to stare at us out of those dark windows. It's gloating down on us. It's like some wicked old monster eyeing its prey. I'm like James. I shudder every time I cross the threshold."

Then she bent forward pleadingly: "Please let us go away before it harms us."

"What nonsense! You're crazy, the pair of you. . . . No, I beg your pardon, my little Caline,—I meant that your nerves are in bad shape. You're run down with nursing me. Why don't you take a holiday, a good rest? Go to Aix for a month."

"And will you come too?" she asked eagerly.

"No, you know what that would mean. Old man Booze would get another strangle-hold on me. Here I'm far from temptation, feeling better than I've done for a long day.

I'm not taking any chances. In this house I may prolong my wretched existence another month or two."

"Well, if you won't go, I won't. I won't leave you here alone."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "There you are. Unreasonable. I admit the house isn't excessively cheerful. It's rather naked. It's rambling and full of echoes. But how absurd to get hysterical about it."

"And what about the two people who perished?"

"True. That's devilish strange and horrible. No, I can't blame you. I suppose because I've lived in a house of fear so long—my own body, I mean—I don't mind this one. Right O! We'd better go as soon as I'm well enough to be moved. In a way I'll be sorry. Here I feel like 'a guarded flame.' I might burn steadily for some time, while elsewhere I'll quickly flicker out. We'll see. . . . Did I tell you I was sending James to Paris to-morrow?"

"Ah! we'll be alone."

"Terrible, isn't it? We, two, in this lonely house. Don't look so aghast, Calina mia; those big, velvety eyes registering Horror. It's only for one night. He'll be back next day."

"Is the trip necessary?"

"Not absolutely. I want him to go to the apartment and get some papers I left there; documents of no value to anyone else, but very precious to me. Why are you afraid? Is it of being left alone with me? D'you think I'm going to eat you?"

"No, no. I'm not afraid for myself. It's for you. If anything should happen."

"Well, we'll keep the pistol handy. And if I should be sick there's the medicine ready. James is mighty little protection anyway. He sleeps all night with a firearm in his fist, behind double-locked doors."

She sighed. "I suppose if it can't be helped he must go; but I'll be awfully anxious."

At that moment the bell at the gate jangled loudly, and James appeared from the stables.

"See who it is," called Peter.

James returned looking a little embarrassed. "A priest, Sir," he said. "I told him I would ask if you were well enough to see him."

"Ha! Our first visitor. A priest. . . . You know, that's considered bad luck."

"I expect it's the one they call the Abbé Grégoire. Mother Marteau told me of him. Do you think you'd better see him?"

"Why not? I'm not partial to priests, but it will be a change for us to talk to someone. Yes, James, show him in."

They watched a tall black figure emerge from the shaded driveway and stalk across the sunny lawn. In spite of his flapping skirts and huge boots the priest walked with dignity. A man of about fifty with a large face so bumpy and irregular it looked as if he were suffering from mumps. His chin and cheeks were blue, his mouth thick-lipped and sensual, his hair a coarse black. His slightly bulging eyes were bloodshot. Yet, when he lifted his black hat, he showed a high intellectual forehead, and his manner had a certain stateliness. Pascaline rose to meet him, but Peter remained seated.

"Monsieur l'Abbé Grégoire, is it not?"

The Abbé bowed in affirmation. "You will pardon me," he said, "if my visit is ill-timed. I heard strangers were here, and I ventured to call in the hope that I might be of some service."

He spoke with a very deep voice in a measured accent.

"I say, that's jolly nice of you," said Peter holding out his hand. "You'll excuse me not rising, but I'm what they call a 'cardiac.' Just at present my heart has simmered down to a gentle calm, but if I make a move it will start jazzing again."

"I understand, Monsieur," said the Abbé gravely. "The

excellent Madame Marteau has told me of your infirmity. It was with the hope of expressing my sympathy I came."

"Thanks awfully. My name's MacBeth, Peter MacBeth. . . . And this is my niece, Mademoiselle O'Neill."

The Abbé bowed profoundly. James had brought a chair, which he took, sitting erect and with massive self-possession.

"I hear you have a nice church at Tremorac," went on Peter politely.

"The church at Tremorac," said the Abbé sonorously, "dates back to the sixteenth century, and is most interesting. But I am not the priest in charge. Indeed I have retired from the active affairs of the church. I was gassed in the War and returned here to my native village, thinking to die. Well, I do not look much like dying, do I?"

"No, you seem as if you were able to sit up and take nourishment," said Peter.

"Indeed I am. Yet they told me I was perishing of consumption. It's the pure air of the place. It's wonderful. That and the simple life. You know I am convinced I will live to be a hundred. One should never give up hope."

"By Jove! That's what I'm beginning to think too. This place has bucked me up no end."

"Ah, Monsieur, I understand your case. What you need is absence of emotion. For a year or so, you should move like an old man and eat like a baby. Then, you'll be even stronger than I."

"Thanks awfully. You do encourage me. Do you live here always?"

"Yes, I have a little house and a large garden. My time is divided between the spade and the pen."

"Then you write too?"

"A little. I am interested in historical research, particularly in local history. You know, you are living in a country rich in tradition. The very people are a study, for they are easily a hundred years behind the times. They don't talk much; their faces are dull and sullen; they are niggardly

in the extreme—all ethnologically interesting. And their language resembles in many respects the Gaelic.”

“More power to them. I’m Scotch myself, but I don’t speak Gaelic.”

“Indeed. And here we find many of the peasants cannot speak French, only their Breton dialect. Even that differs slightly in neighbouring communes. For instance in the fishing village of Auberon and the farming village of Tremorac, the patois shows quite a marked difference, and the people are even more dissimilar. They do not mix, one despising the other. The fisher folk are morose, quarrelsome and spendthrift; the farmer folk on the other hand are more talkative, but at the same time crafty and close-fisted. However, both drink heavily, men and women.”

“The country seems to be really interesting.”

“Yes, historically so. There’s a wealth of folklore that has never been collected.”

“Is that what you’re doing now, Monsieur l’Abbé?”

“Not just at present. Some day I hope to get round to it. Just now I’m writing a book on Gilles de Rais, the greatest monster of history.”

“Indeed. Excuse my ignorance,—what did he do?”

“He is said to have killed over eight hundred women and children. I’m interested because this was his ancient domain. The whole country is still stamped with his sinister personality. Just round the point, not ten kilometres from here, is the ruin of his favourite castle. It is believed that in that alone, buried under the courtyard, are the bodies of two hundred of his victims.”

“How horrible!” exclaimed Pascaline.

“Yes, I don’t know how true it is, though. The castle is a State monument, and no one is permitted to disturb it. I tried to get leave to dig in the courtyard; but though I brought a certain political influence to bear, another even stronger seemed to oppose me. My repeated efforts have been frustrated. It is a pity, for my book will suffer. But

I fear I am boring you with all this. I must be going."

"Please don't hurry away, Monsieur l'Abbé. We're having tea presently. You might honour us by remaining. And while we're talking about history, you might be able to tell us about the history of . . . this house."

"Ah! this house!" repeated the Abbé, and his tone was so charged with significance that it startled them. Then he stood and stared at that white façade so tranquil in the sunshine. His eyes narrowed, his mouth grew grim. There was something challenging in his regard.

"It was partly on account of this house I came to visit you. There is a strange fatality about it. I suppose you know that the last tenants have perished in a mysterious and awful fashion."

"Yes, we've just learnt that."

"The case has baffled the greatest detectives of the country. The deaths of these poor people remain a mystery that perhaps will never be solved unless . . . unless there are others."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the assassin is still at large, and what he has done once he can do again. Both crimes were apparently senseless acts of savagery perpetrated by someone who has secret access to the house. Of that I am convinced. Well, one never knows. . . ."

The Abbé shrugged his shoulders and made a slight grimace.

"Just what are you driving at, Monsieur l'Abbé?"

"I saw these bodies, Monsieur, and I don't like to think of them. Whoever did it will not rest content. There will be fresh victims. That is why I thought it my solemn duty to warn you. That is chiefly why I came here to-day."

He paused. Then he raised his hand portentously, and Peter noted that on his breast were pinned the ribbons of the Croix de Guerre and of the Médaille Militaire. The fellow must have been a bit of a fighter.

"Yes, I want to warn you. Do not stay in this house a day longer than you can help. It is evil and dangerous. As others have perished so you may perish. Don't think me a sensationalist; don't imagine I'm trying to frighten you; but if you'd seen what my eyes have seen, you'd never pass another night under that accursed roof. . . . But excuse me. I grow too vehement. My feelings carry me away. I must now take my leave. I hope you will not think me impertinent and interfering, but—I have seen, I have seen. . . ."

When he had gone, Peter remarked: "Nice cheerful individual, isn't he? How did you like him?"

"Like you, I don't like priests."

"Bah! There's devilish little of the priest about him. Quite dramatic, wasn't he! Did you see old Mère Marteau come out and listen while he was giving us his solemn warning?"

"I expect the old lady was curious," said Pascaline.

"She certainly was. But she slipped back into her kitchen when she saw I was watching her. I'm convinced that old party knows more than she tells."

"Probably. She doesn't tell any more than she can help."

"No doubt they all look on us as a lot of fools and laugh at us in their sleeves. Funny about that ancient Johnny, Gilles de Rais."

"Yes," she answered absently. Then: "It's to-morrow James goes, isn't it?"

"Right."

"Couldn't you put it off?"

"No, I've decided to send him to-morrow."

She knew that when Peter decided anything there was nothing more to be said; so, with a sigh, she changed the subject.

CHAPTER SIX

PETER COMPLAINS

Shortly after daybreak James left to catch a local train. He would arrive in Paris that evening. Early as it was Pascaline was up to see him off.

"You'll be back to-morrow night without fail, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss. There's nothing to keep me. I'll be late, but you can depend on it, I'll be back."

The morning passed cheerfully. The housemaid sang light-heartedly at her work, and the big front rooms were full of sunshine. As she scoured her copper pans, even Madame Marteau had a sympathetic air. It was this unwonted geniality that gave the girl courage to approach the old woman.

"Madame Marteau, I want to ask you a great favour. Will you sleep in the house to-night?"

The cook stopped in her scrubbing, and her face seemed all at once as hard as a walnut.

"Never, Mam'selle."

But Pascaline went on tenaciously. "It's like this,—I shall be all alone with Monsieur and, if anything should happen,—if he's taken sick during the night, for instance,—I'll be helpless."

"Well, Mam'selle, you're a nurse, aren't you? If the master's sick it's little use I'd be."

"It's not that exactly. I'm . . . afraid."

"So'm I," said Madame Marteau.

"It's just for one night. And see . . . I'll give you this."

Pascaline held out a hundred franc note. The woman's eyes seemed magnetized by it.

"I'd like to, Mam'selle, but—there's Marteau. For forty years I've never slept a night away from his side."

"Then, let your husband come with you."

"That might make a difference. I'll see Marteau when I go home and we'll talk it over."

"But I want to be sure you'll come."

Again the cook looked covetously at the note.

"Well, Mam'selle, you may count on Marteau. He always was willing to be agreeable."

That was decided then. Her nervous fears were at rest, and it was quite gaily she waited on Peter and gave him lunch. He was getting solid food now, and appreciating it hugely. On this morning he had a small sole and some stewed pears.

"You know," he said cheerfully, "I believe that priest chap put a lot of pep into me. If he could get better in this place, why can't I?"

"Of course, you can. I see an improvement every day."

This was true. As he sat on the lawn after lunch there was a faint glow on his cheeks and animation in his eyes.

"I want to get my hair cut," he observed. "If there's anything I loathe it's a man with long hair. I'm beginning to be bored too. That's a good sign, isn't it? I wish I'd something decent to read. I should have told James to bring back a stack of new novels."

"What kind do you like?"

"Detective yarns. I hate love stuff or anything highbrow. Give me a good crime story that keeps me guessing. I've always been interested in the detection of crime. You know, as soon as I can get about, I'm going to try my hand at investigating the crimes that have been committed under this roof."

"No indeed. As soon as you can get about you're going for a long sea voyage, perhaps to look for that Pacific isle you spoke of."

"Well, we'll see. Let's have some tea."

The tea increased his restlessness. "I'm getting fed up with inaction," he grumbled. "I'd like to see a bit of the place. Most of all I'd like to see the sea. Let's go."

"Are you sure it won't have a bad effect on your heart?"

"No, I feel 'full of beans.' Take me where you went the other day."

So she led the way, looking back anxiously; but his manner was joyously eager and his blue eyes boyishly lit with adventure. As they plunged into the gloom of the shrubbery the air smelt rank and close.

"The back of the house never gets the sunshine," he remarked. "If I remained here I'd chop down some of those trees. Everything's been growing unchecked for ages. What's that ancient looking edifice?"

It was the octagon-shaped tower with its pointed roof.

"It might have been a pigeon-house," suggested Pascaline.

He peered through the solitary window.

"The glass is so covered with dirt and cobwebs I can't see anything. And the door's locked. If we can't find the key we'll get James to break in. Maybe we'll find a skeleton there."

"Please don't suggest further horrors."

"Sorry . . . Oh, I say! There's the sea, bless it; the jolly old sea."

At the sight he was as happy as a boy. It was very far away, though. Just a blade of blue steel glittering between the level of the sand and the lift of the sky.

"Look! a white sail and the smoke of a steamer. Lord! How it does me good to see that again. Space, freedom, and the salt in the breeze. Let's go and sit on the sand."

Somewhat shakily he went down the uneven steps to the beach. Above them the great root of an oak clutched the cliff like an octopus, while ivy climbed halfway down the rock. As they sat in the shadow, before them was flung that far level of sunlit sand. It filled the eye just to that blade of blue, with its fleck of sail, its plume of smoke.

"Isn't it gorgeous!" said Peter. "But the sea's too far away. I want to see it here at my feet, spanking the sand

and roaring smokily in those caves. How fast it must come in."

She, too, was thrilled by a sense of beauty. There was not a cloud in all the grey-blue sky, and where the yellow-brown hillside swept up to it, two of the three windmills were turning, while the spire of Tremorac was like a silver spear-point. Huddled under the protecting hill, Auberon seemed asleep in the lazy sunshine, and its fisher-boats lay tilted on the sand. Far away, near the edge of the water, they could distinguish a cluster of black figures.

"I'd like to see what they're doing," said Peter eagerly.

"No, not to-day. You're not strong enough. Then there's the tide. It might overtake us."

"Yes, I forgot the tide. Look! Someone's on the sands coming towards us."

The black figure must have been about a mile away, but as it drew near it proved to be a man. He walked slowly, making occasional gestures. As he came close they could hear him speaking to himself. At first he did not see them, and he was only a few yards away when he stopped, regarding them curiously.

He was tall and gaunt with a sallow face and long grey beard. He stooped slightly, as if afflicted with rheumatism. This awkward gait was made more marked by pointed wooden shoes. His clothes were worn, sun-faded, sea-stiffened. From the shadow of a peaked cap his eyes regarded them with a steady stare. It was his eyes that surprised them. They were grey, a grim shark-grey, with just a hint of shark cruelty in them. Otherwise his appearance was rather venerable. Over his arm he carried a wicker basket.

"What have you got there, *mon vieux*?" asked Peter.

"Fish, Monsieur."

"May we see them?"

The old man put down his basket and pulled aside a layer

of glistening brown sea weed. Underneath were blue and silver mackerel, the metallic grey coil of a conger, drab soles, a golden *dorade*.

"A pretty lot. I'm the owner of the White House up there. Go up and tell the cook to buy all she wants."

The tall old fisherman looked at him piercingly. "Ah-h! You're the owner of that house up there. . . ."

"Yes, the new owner."

The grey beard nodded, abstraction in his eyes. Then he said: "You must be a brave man, Monsieur."

"Not particularly. Why?"

"To live in the White House."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Doesn't everyone know it's a house of murder? Aren't you afraid, Monsieur, of . . ."

He drew his hand significantly across his throat. Pascaline looked startled. Peter was annoyed.

"That's my business," he told the man sharply.

"All right. You know your business, no doubt. Well, I'm afraid of it, but 'twon't prevent me going up there to sell my fish. *Bonjour, Monsieur.*"

He went away muttering.

"What a gloomy old beast," said Peter irritably. "I'm sorry he shocked you. Forget him."

"I don't think I can. He was a striking-looking man, wasn't he? There was something impressive about him."

"Something nutty, if you ask me."

The incident had upset Peter. No longer was he cheerful and happy. And, as if to correspond to his mood, with the declining sun a chill seemed to take the air.

"Let's go up again," he said, "I'm a little tired."

They found that Madame Marteau had bought the best of the fish.

"It was old Ragon," she told them. "He often comes. They say he's a bit crazy. He's been queer ever since his daughter left him. She was a very pretty girl, too pretty to

go straight. She ran off to Paris and never came back. She was all he had, so he took it bad. I'm sure if he'd found the man that betrayed her there would have been another murder."

"Mother Marteau's coming with her husband to sleep in the house to-night," said Pascaline."

"Quite unnecessary," grumbled Peter. "I'm capable of looking after myself and you too."

It was dusk when the cook and her husband arrived. They heard the club-footed cobbler stumping up the uncarpeted stairs to the room overhead. Pascaline was comforted, but Peter was irascible.

"Ridiculous," he snorted. "I expect the fellow's half drunk."

He was wrong, however. The Père Marteau was wholly and entirely drunk.

Peter placed on the table beside his bed the automatic pistol.

"There! That's the best protector. I used to be a good shot and I'm a light sleeper. Let any one try to play tricks, I'll nail them to the door."

Pascaline slept in the next room, but she did not go to bed immediately. Her window blind would not work and the moonlight streamed in. She could see the moon, icy still in an empty sky. Pine tips needled it. She thought how weird the wet sands must be in the void silence. How the moon must gleam on death-still pools and glimmer on weedy shelves. How it must gild the grey roofs sleeping under the hill, and dance with silver feet in the welter of the incoming tide. She had a strange desire to see all that.

She could not sleep while the moon continued to peer in; but at last it passed out of range and darkness invaded the room. As she listened intently she could hear Peter breathing softly, while from above came a chorus of snores in two different keys. Reassured, she lay down and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PASCALINE IS TERRIFIED

She was awakened by a bright light striking her eyes. For a moment she was dazzled, but it was not the moon this time. The morning sun had just cleared the tree-tops and her room was already flooded with radiance.

Ever so gladly she arose. Here in the candid sunshine, how foolish seemed her overnight fears. Nerves, imagination. Peter was right. No wonder he laughed at her.

She dressed and went out on the lawn where the grass was still grey with dew. Somewhere in the shrubbery a merle was singing, and sunshine welled down from a serene sky. Some rooks that lived in the tall trees cawed fussily. As she breathed deeply of the pure air, a sense of the joy of living came to her.

The White House was smiling in the sunshine; the maid was singing as she cleaned the rooms. All the windows were wide open except that of Peter. With a sense of happiness, she thought of him sleeping peacefully up there. He had been so nice to her since they had come here, always gentle, kindly, considerate. He seemed fond of her. As to her feelings towards him, pity and gratitude were present, as well as a sincere and increasing affection.

If he had looked down and seen her there in the centre of the sun-drenched lawn, he would have had an emotion of joy in her young beauty. The pure oval of her face was of a magnolia whiteness and her coiled braids of hair had the sheen of black satin. Her upturned head, showing the long curve of her throat, was like a flower poised on its stem. Her features were clearly, exquisitely cut; dreams dwelt in the depths of her eyes. Her lips were parted in a smile of wistful sweetness, while her pose with hands clasped behind

her showed off the lithe slenderness of her figure. Such was Pascaline, looking up at the window of Peter.

Madame Marteau was busy in her kitchen, when the girl, breathing joy and contentment, hailed her.

“Did you sleep well, Madame?”

The cook shook her hoary head decisively. “Not a wink, Mam’selle. Neither me nor Marteau closed an eye all night. No, I wouldn’t do it again, not if you was to offer me a thousand francs.”

“But you heard nothing to alarm you?”

“Nothing special,” admitted the woman. “But we was so worried about you and master.”

“Well, it’s all right. We won’t want you to stay to-night. James will be home about dusk. You can sleep sound in your own bed.”

Madame Marteau looked just a little disappointed. Pascaline went upstairs and knocked at Peter’s door. He was awake, but she saw that his face was strained and pale.

“What’s the matter? You look tired.”

“Yes, I had a bad night. My heart was doing stunts and I couldn’t breathe. I expect I went too far yesterday.”

“I was afraid you were overdoing it. You must go easy at first. Better stay in bed to-day.”

“That’s such a bore. I’ll get up even if it’s only to sit awhile.”

She knew it was no use opposing him, so after lunch she installed him comfortably before the window. There he lay back in a long chair, listless and weary. It was curious how all the joy went out of her to see him thus. She felt discouraged, tired, sad.

And, as if to mate her mood, the weather had taken one of its sudden changes. Zinc-grey clouds climbed up the sky and curtained the sun. Everything became melancholy. In the darkling trees not a leaf stirred. A silence, calm and brooding, enveloped them. Nature seemed apathetic and indifferent. Stifled with a sense of oppression, she went out

on to the terrace. In that world of subtle half tones and silent emptiness she had a strange feeling of unreality, as if she was a dream creature in a dream world.

On re-entering the house she found Peter sodden with dejection, so she brisked him up with a cup of tea. Bad for his heart, but his *morale* seemed more important just then. She even permitted him a cigarette.

"It's the weather that gives us the *cafard*," she said. "It's one of those days when everything seems to be in a vacuum. Never mind. James will soon be back with lots of news."

"I wish he were here to take me out in the car," grumbled Peter. "I'm so sick of being cooped up."

"To-morrow we'll go for a long drive. I tell you what we'll do to cheer us up: we'll have a big fire made in the dining room."

The fire was a great success. Over their simple supper they lingered in its blaze. The flaming faggots threw dancing shadows on the white walls, and the warmth was comforting. The maid cleared away; then she and Madame Marteau went home. Pascaline and Peter were alone.

"It's about nine," said Peter. "James should be back."

The girl was looking out of the window expectantly. Every moment she hoped to hear the bray of a saxon and to see friendly headlights boring through the gloom.

"The train must be late," she suggested. "He'll come, without a doubt."

An hour passed in waiting. The fire flickered fantastically, then subsided into crimson embers. Gloom gathered round them. Outside it was quite dark. Above the black barrier of the trees a gibbous moon was set in ragged clouds. An evil moon, she thought, like a fungus clinging to the spongy sky. She closed the blinds.

"Perhaps I'd better lock the front door," she said timorously. "I'll open it when James comes."

There were furtive shadows in the hallway as she stole out

and turned the key. Peter sat crumpled up over the dying fire.

"You'd better go to bed," she told him with affected cheerfulness. "I'll give you some of that medicine that does you so much good."

"No sign of James?"

"Not yet."

"Hum! I've a feeling he's not coming."

"Oh, don't say that."

"Why not? I'm not afraid to be alone. The thought braces me more than any medicine. Come. Let's light the candles. We'd better not wait up for James."

She rather rejoiced at his courage, and followed him upstairs, candle in hand. He took the medicine with the valerian in it.

"I'll be all right," he assured her. "I've rested all day. My heart will be calm."

Between their two rooms there was a connecting door.

"Don't lock it," he advised. "Lock the door in the corridor, but not that. Now, don't be afraid. Go right to bed and sleep soundly. Good night, dear child."

.

She opened her eyes with a paralysing sense of fear. . . .

She was sitting bolt upright, her hands clutching at the bedcover. The darkness was absolute. For a moment she could not get her bearings. Where was the window?—the door? Then, in a flash, everything came right.

The flash was a sudden glare of sheet lightning. It came like the smack of a white hand, revealing lividly the window frame. But when it had passed, the darkness was more profound than ever. She was bewildered no longer, but now her fear leapt to sheer terror.

Something was in the room.

She felt it, she knew it . . . something incredibly evil and obscene. In the darkness she could hear the hammer of her

heart, her panting breath. Something was over there by the big black wardrobe, watching her, waiting, an inky core in the blackness. Her eyes were riveted on that smudge of darkness, and her sense of a Presence grew. Then another livid flare buffeted the black and . . . she saw. The Thing was nearer now. All at once she could *smell* it, a bestial smell.

With one piercing scream she sprang from the bed, but, even as she did so, she heard it leap. She flung herself against the door leading to Peter's room, wrenching at the handle, bursting it open. In a moment she had reached his bed and was clutching him convulsively.

Peter was wide awake it seemed. She felt his arm round her.

"What is it?"

"It's in there," she panted. "I don't know what . . . There, on the bed."

Peter reached for the automatic and fired twice. They heard a scuffling, a squeak, then silence.

Pistol in hand, he held her closely, trying to pierce the darkness. His ears were keen for the faintest sound, but there was none. All was still, unnaturally still. Probably five minutes passed.

"I must get up and see," he said gently. "Whatever it is, it's quiet."

"No, don't. There's danger."

"Bah! I'm armed."

He released himself from her clinging arms and lit the candle. Then he advanced into the other room.

"There's nothing," he called back. "It must have been a rat we heard. You've had a bad nightmare, that's all. Come and see."

Trembling greatly she followed him. The flickering candle showed no trace of an intruder, yet she shuddered.

"Don't you smell anything?" she asked.

Peter sniffed. "Yes, I do. An odour of consummate beastliness."

"And look," she cried, pointing to the door. "It's open. I locked it when I went to bed."

"Ah! That, then, was the noise we heard,—the squeak of the lock. Whatever it was, it must have been in the room when you locked the door. Did you look under your bed?"

"Good Heavens! No."

"Ha! It might be better to do so in future. Well, the thing has escaped. See, there's a bullet mark in the plaster. I'll just take a squint down the corridor."

"Don't go too far. Don't leave me."

In the long, lank corridor the shadows seemed to mock his feeble light and, after a few paces, he returned.

"No good. I'll have a thorough search in the morning. Nothing to do at present."

Carefully he relocked the door.

"You'd better go to bed again. I don't think we'll have any more trouble to-night."

"I couldn't sleep."

"At least lie down and rest. You needn't worry. I'm going to sit up the balance of the night."

"No. I'll sit up. You rest. You need it more than I do," she pleaded.

"That's where you're wrong. A little excitement like this seems to brace me up."

"Then you weren't sleeping when I burst in on you?"

"No. I couldn't breathe, you know. I'd have to sit up anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"I'm so sorry. . . . What's that?" She clung to him, suddenly terrified. He felt her form, boyishly slim, in his arms.

"Nothing. Only the hoot of an owl."

"Ah! I'm all unstrung."

She was trembling violently. His arm tightened around

her and, as she looked up at him, half unconsciously he kissed her. There was a quick catch in her breath.

"That's all right, child," he said soothingly. Suddenly he was aware of her appeal, of her sensitive womanhood. Abruptly he released her.

"Do you know," he said grimly, "if I were a virile, full-blooded man instead of a moribund creak, you would be in a dangerous position."

Her great dark eyes looked at him seriously. "I know what you mean."

"Well, aren't you glad I'm a sick man?"

She shook her head.

"Even if it means your safety?"

"I'd rather see you strong, even if it meant my safety."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked steadily at her. She had twisted her jet black hair in two braids that hung on either side of her face, framing its lustrous pallor. In the sweetness of her expression she reminded him of a Madonna. Something virginal about her had always impressed him. Now it struck him with fresh force.

"After all," he said deliberately, "you're a married woman hating your husband. Why should you care what you do?"

A quick flush mantled to her brow. "There's something perhaps I should tell you," she faltered.

"You mean . . . you're not really married?"

"Not that. I told you before,—he forced me to marry him, in the church even. He swore it was for my own protection, and I was so much afraid I yielded. But . . . I was married only as far as the ceremony went."

"You mean the marriage was never consummated."

"That's what I mean."

"Very curious! You know, I believe you absolutely. Indeed, instinctively I have always felt that."

"He never forced himself on me. He knew I shrank from him and he would not do violence to my feelings. There was a strange strain of nobility in him."

"Extraordinary! He intrigues me more and more, your Spirelli. Well, I'm not going to take a lesson in decency from him. You'll be as safe with me as if I were your veritable father. God knows I'm old enough for that."

"I never think of you as old."

"If you get a divorce from Spirelli, could you care enough for me to marry me?"

"I think so."

"It would be foolish. You're over twenty-five years younger than I. When I was an old man you would be in your prime."

"I would not mind."

"By Gad! I would. But I'll never live to be old. And in any event the emotion of getting married would probably kill me. I knew a chap with a weak heart who popped off in the middle of the honeymoon. But in that case you'd have my name and my money, and that would console me."

He rose with a laugh that was almost boyish.

"And now, my dear child, you're catching cold. Go to bed at once. I'm going to get into a dressing-gown."

He disappeared into his bedroom. When he returned she had crept into her bed.

"See, I've put on two dressing-gowns, a silk and a woollen one."

As he paced up and down they hung closely on his lean frame.

"Now I want you to sleep, sleep like a baby."

"I'll try."

He was struck by a break in her voice and stared at the face on the pillow.

"You're crying, foolish child. Don't worry about anything at all. I'll take care of you."

"It's you that needs taking care of."

"Then, you'll take care of me."

"Yes, but I want to take care of you for a long time. I want you to live to be old."

"To please you I will if I can."

"You can if you will."

"You think that?"

"If you don't take to drinking again."

"I don't think so somehow. It's strange, but I haven't any desire to drink any more."

"Ah! You make me happy when you say that."

"Then why are you still crying?"

"Because I'm happy."

"Silly child! Go to sleep."

Her faint sobs ceased and soon he heard her breathing gently. As he watched over her till the first glimmer of dawn, he too felt a curious sense of happiness and peace.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MURDER

About eleven next morning Peter was aroused by the entry of Pascaline with a telegram.

"It was delivered early, but I didn't like to awaken you."

She looked pale and troubled. Her hand trembled as she gave him the green envelope. He tore it open: "By Jove!"

"Something wrong?"

Frowningly he nodded. "We should have received this last night. Evidently it came late and the confounded fools at the post office wouldn't deliver it. Listen:

On arrival found flat burgled. Much damage done. Police formalities prevent me leaving to-day. Will return to-morrow without fail. James.

I see the hand of our apache friends in this," he added grimly.

She looked at him aghast. "Do you think they've got much?"

"I don't care what they've got as long as they've not got

what I sent James for. But there's no use in getting excited about it. Excitement is the very worst thing for my heart. No good worrying till James gets back and we know all. How is lunch getting on? I've a proud appetite."

He ate with great relish some breast of chicken, salad and stewed fruit.

"One of these days I'll be getting back to a beefsteak hunger," he warned her. "Now, what about a cigarette?"

"If you promise not to inhale," she agreed.

"Right O! You know, I enjoy the two cigarettes a day more than in the old days I used to enjoy twenty. And as for grub, I never appreciated it so much in my life before. I get more fun out of a potato and a glass of milk than I used to out of a hundred franc feed at Prunier's. In this affair of Life the ascetic is the truest epicure."

He propped himself up voluptuously, blowing smoke rings. "Ah! I feel divinely lazy."

"How can you be so calm after everything?"

"After what?"

"Last night. This telegram."

"I'm learning to be philosophical. Cultivate calm, practise placidity. Be like a bronze Buddha. That's the creed of the 'cardiac'. Go easy. You know, for some of us to go easy is damnably difficult."

"Hadn't you better rest after lunch?"

"No, I'm getting up. I even feel like taking another walk."

"Wait till after tea, then."

Rather impatiently he did so. Stretched on a long chair on the lawn, he seemed unusually cheerful. Though the day was gusty, with high hurrying clouds, it was sheltered there. The only sign of wind was the swishing of the tall tree tops, and a steady growling in the lower limbs.

"The moon will be full to-night," he remarked, pointing to a clear pool of blue sky in which lay what looked to be a circular shaving of ice.

"Yes. They tell me it's the day of the highest tide."

"Ah! then let's go down to the beach and see it come in. It will take our minds off other things."

"When do you think James will be back?"

"About nine. We'll have another jolly fire."

"Yes, and perhaps James won't have such bad news after all."

It was in this mood of determined optimism they took the little trail to the pigeon tower. The wind was hearty to the point of horseplay. It pummelled a tall pine as if it were a punching bag. As they descended the rock-hewn steps, the sea breeze smote them boisterously. Piles of riband-like sea weed marked the height of the last tide. The great arena of sand was strewn with heaps of it like dead men on a battle plain. They disturbed millions of sand-hoppers.

"Let's walk along the dyke," he suggested.

Climbing up to the right, they found themselves on a narrow pathway. They were on the dividing line between the green meadows and the arid sands.

"You see that little wood beyond the fields," said the girl pointing. "There's a château in the heart of it."

"Indeed. Whose?" said Peter indifferently.

"De Marsac is the family name. But there's only one left and he doesn't live there. He only comes down for the shooting."

"Then, he ought to be here soon. Look. . . ."

Overhead a line of ducks whistled past, their necks stretched, their wings working at top speed.

"There must be lots of snipe, too, in those fields. I wouldn't mind having a whack at them myself. My shooting days are over though."

Suddenly the pathway turned to the right and away from the sea. In place of the sand, on their left they had the marshes, now purpled with a heather-like growth. At the base of the dyke, before the bogland began, there was an ugly slough. A little muddy surface water covered grey slime.

Bubbles rose from it continually and things moved in it. They proved to be thousands of little crabs exactly the colour of the mud.

On the other side were little fields, some green with lucerne others gold with stubble. A curious droning drew them to a grey-roofed farmhouse that nestled in an orchard. They took a path between a patch of mangolds and a pasture where some cows were feeding. A dog ran at them noisily, but a girl in sabots looked up from her knitting to call it off.

The droning was a threshing machine. A man perched dizzily on a cone of golden straw gazed down on them. In the yard three teams of horses were circling monotonously, while at the tail of the separator three rosy-faced girls were forking away the straw. Men smeared with dust and sweat were feeding sheaves to their hungry monster, and the grey-whiskered farmer was carrying the grain in sacks. Everyone looked wonderingly at them, but no one paused for a moment in the work.

They went back as they had come. A hedge of brambles skirted the trail. The big berries hung in clusters, each jet black, yet with every tiny nodule reflecting the light. In an orchard cider-apples, golden and crimson, carpeted the ground. As the wind whipped a bright colour into their pale cheeks, it pleased her to see how keen Peter was.

A purple palisade of cloud had formed against the western sky, and now the sinking sun dipped behind it with an effect of sudden gloom. In a moment everything seemed to change. From a bright, gay world it became a grey sad one.

"Too bad," said the girl. "That horrid cloud is going to cheat us out of a lovely sunset. The air's getting chilly too. Let's hurry back."

"All right, but hurry slowly. Remember your companion is a wretched cardiac. The legs are willing, but the heart is weak."

She saw he was becoming fatigued, and regretted they had come so far. They had still half a mile to go, and they had

covered barely half the distance when she looked back.

"See!" she cried. "We are going to be given our sunset after all."

For the lower end of the cloud curtain had lifted, and the space was filled with light like yellow wine. They watched it glow to daffodil, then blaze and burn. Now it was shooting level rays across the sand.

"Look!" she exclaimed, "the tide."

For the sea was racing towards them across the sand. It was still far off, but they could see its foremost foam prancing and sparkling in the amber glow. There was something joyfully triumphant about it, as if it exulted in its power. They heard its hollow roar, and behind that advance line of turbulent water they beheld all the might and majesty of the ocean.

"Come," she warned him. "We must hurry or we'll be cut off."

Rather breathlessly they went on, casting backward glances at the pursuing tide. Its front of dancing fire grew plainer, its roar more sonorous. The cloud-cleft was now an incandescent glow. It dazzled the eye; it sent fierce shafts over the sand and kindled to golden fury the boiling surf.

"Isn't it gorgeous!" said Peter fascinated. "Let's watch it."

"No, no. Let's hurry. We must beat it."

"Good. What fun. A race with the tide."

When they next dared to look, that portentous roar was sounding in their ears. But now all the gold had vanished. The cloud-rift burned an angry red, and the charging sea was like a welter of blood. It was inspiring to watch that long line of crimson foam come on so irresistibly. In spite of their haste they had to pause and admire.

They reached the steps just as the first waves lapped them. As they gained the summit, they looked down on a wine-dark waste of living waters. With the magnificent

gesture of a conqueror, the scornful sea had taken possession, arrogant and irresistible.

They were still looking down when they heard a motor horn. Hurrying to the house, they found a weary and dejected James.

"I managed to get here a little sooner," he told them. "I took a local train that stopped at all the stations, but brought me in two hours ahead of the express."

"Did you get what I wanted?"

"Yes, Sir," said James, handing Peter a packet. "They found everything but the secret drawer in your desk."

"All right. The other stuff doesn't matter. Much damage?"

"Awful, Sir," groaned James. "It nearly made me sick. They got all the silver, of course. That was about all they could carry off and they seemed to be fair rotten with spite. They destroyed all they could, so that it won't be any good any more. Pictures slashed, statuettes chipped, mirrors smashed, chairs ripped; furniture hacked to match wood, crystal and china pounded to pieces. . . . Oh, it was devilish."

"Never mind. Where was the house-keeper?"

"She cleared out. Got scared soon after we left. Seems she saw queer characters hanging about, and after what had happened to her she got the wind up. She wanted to write and tell us, but we'd left no address."

"True. And the police?"

"They're investigating. I left them the keys. They think they have a clue. I gave them our address here."

"That won't do them much good. We're leaving the day after to-morrow."

The face of James expressed relief.

"Do you think you'll be well enough to travel, Sir?" he hazarded.

"Yes. Have the car ready."

"I certainly will, Sir."

As he waited on them at dinner that evening he looked like another man. His eyes were joyous, his manner buoyant. He made a roaring fire and the meal passed gaily. But when the time for candles arrived he came to them with a startled air.

"The pistol, sir. I can't find it in my room."

"All right, James. I borrowed it. I'll give it to you."

"Oh no, Sir. You keep it if you want it."

"That's all right. I'm not afraid. You can have it."

"No, no. There's mademoiselle, Sir. I didn't think of her. I wouldn't take it on any account."

He went away, looking a little subdued and anxious. They heard him locking the doors and going up to his room.

"Poor James," said Peter, "he's terrified for his life, but he won't own it. I might have let him have the pistol; but he's right, we have the first claim on it. Pray the gods we won't need it."

Pascaline locked her door that led to the corridor, peered under the bed, poked about the big black wardrobe. When she put out her candle she saw a magnificent moon. In front of the house the lawn looked as if it were covered with snow. As she undressed that rogue of a moon stared in at her audaciously. Before getting into bed she called to Peter.

"May I open the door a little between our two rooms?"

"Yes, but don't be afraid. Sleep soundly. I'll guarantee nothing harms you."

She felt a perfect trust in him and, tired after their unwonted walk, she was soon in her first slumber.

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A voice galvanized her into wakefulness. Peter, holding a candle, was staring down on her.

"What is it?"

"Did you hear nothing?"

"No, I've been sleeping."

"I thought you might have heard . . . might have been afraid."

"Did *you* hear something?"

"Yes, but I may have been mistaken."

His face was sharp and anxious in the wavering light. In his right hand he held the automatic.

"I'm worried about James. Listen! Did you hear that?"

"A moan!"

"Yes, from the direction of his room. I don't like to leave you, but I'm afraid he's in trouble. I must go."

"Then, I'll go too. Excuse me a moment, I'll put on a dressing-gown and slippers."

"Quick then."

Unlocking the door leading to the corridor he looked out.

"James," he called. There was no reply.

"James, my lad!" louder this time.

They both listened. In the stillness that followed they seemed to hear the sound of a stair creaking under a stealthy step.

"Come," said Peter with a sharp intake of breath. "Something tells me we're needed. Curse this horrible house."

He went so swiftly down the corridor that the light threatened to go out. When they came to the narrow stair that went up to the attics he hesitated.

"That smell again, that beastly smell. . . . James is up there, isn't he?"

"Yes, yes."

Peter leaped up the steps and, trembling with excitement, she followed him. At the top they reached a passage on which the servants' rooms opened.

"Which is his?" snapped Peter.

"I don't know. I've never been up here before."

They hurried along the passage and, about midway, came to an open door. Peter held his light high.

"Stand back," he cried suddenly. "Don't come in. Don't look."

But he spoke too late. She had seen.

James was lying on the floor, face down in a pool of blood.

CHAPTER NINE

DOCTOR CHAVAS IS INTERESTED

"Is he dead?"

Peter had put the candle on the floor and was bending over the body.

"No, he's still breathing. . . . *Good God!*" He left the fallen man and came to her quickly. Even in that dubious light she saw that his eyes were blank with horror.

"Look here," he said harshly, "we've got to get help. This is a matter of life and death. What cursed luck there's no one in the house but ourselves!"

"I'll go," she told him eagerly.

"Will you. . . . ? That's good. I can't leave him and there's a chance we may save him yet. Who can you get?"

"There's a doctor at Tremorac."

"That's too far—nearly four miles. What about the Chinese chap across the bay?"

"He doesn't practise. Perhaps he won't come."

"Make him come. In a case like this no man can refuse. It's only a mile across the sands. You can be back in half an hour if you hurry."

"All right. I'll hurry."

"Wait a moment. Here's another candle. I'll light it and you can see your way out."

He went to the back of the room, and lighting the candle belonging to James, he gave it to her.

"You'd better take this too," he said grimly, pressing

the flat black automatic into her hand. She hesitated.

"But you?"

He laughed bitterly. "Oh, I'll be all right."

He reached down and lifted something from the floor. It was a short thick poker. He gripped it tensely.

"It was this that did the job, and I only wish the devil that used it would come again. But now, go; and God be with you."

She hesitated no longer. She was unconscious of fear. The danger to another seemed to make her careless of her own. She let herself out by the front door and extinguished the candle. The terrace was meal-white in the moonlight; but, when she plunged into the wood behind the house, darkness gripped her. As she stumbled along the trail, she felt glad of the automatic, glad too she knew how to use it. That was one of the things Spirelli had taught her—to shoot quick and straight. Half divining her way, she made up her mind to fire at the first threatening shadow. How she hated this rank wood with its moss and fungus and odour of decay! Thank Heaven she was nearing the end of the trail. Then, with a sharp turn, she came to where the old pigeon tower was blocked against the white blaze of the moonlight.

Once on the sands she breathed freely. It was like escaping from a citadel into the open air. And to-night everything was so vividly clear. The full-grown moon was insolently bright. As she ran across the sand its ridges were like fretted silver, the heaps of seaweed like masses of tinselled paper, each worm whorl a nickelled spiral that flattened under her feet. The house with the red roof seemed no great distance away, and, as she ran on, its details grew more grotesque. Once she plunged through a quicksilver shallow, her eyes fixed on that sleeping house. Then again she panted over a bar of sinking sand that tried to hold her back. Now, she had gained the rocky foreshore.

A round pool gleamed like the inner dial of a silver watch, and a scurrying crab snapped silver nippers at her feet; but with thickly beating heart she climbed the cliffs and stood at last before the silent house.

There was a wicker gate and a grass-grown pathway leading to a wooden porch. On either side of the dark doorway circular windows held the moon with a green glaze. Like frozen eyes they were, staring at her from the head of some fabled monster,—Gorgon eyes. Mustering her courage, she knocked.

How loud her knock sounded! As she waited she could feel her heart thumping. . . . Did they not hear? Again she knocked. . . . Silence. Fear seized her that no one was there. Desperately she hammered with the butt of her pistol. . . . Ha! someone was coming at last. Footsteps very soft and secret. Suddenly she looked up and saw that a small panel of the door had opened and a face was looking down on her.

It was a round, flat face with jetlike slits for eyes. As expressionless as the face of an ivory idol, it gave her a queer thrill of unreality.

"I want the doctor," she cried. "There's someone dying over there at the White House. We must have help. Every minute counts."

The face was gone. She almost wondered if she had imagined it. Impatiently she waited. It seemed as if the house had sunk into slumber once more, and again she was preparing to beat upon the door when she heard the gruffest of voices:

"Who's there?"

The sound seemed to come from above her, and she had to back away from the house to locate it. Then she saw that from the conning tower above the roof a man was looking down on her.

"I'm from Castel Blanc," she cried. "The house at the head of the bay."

"I know. What's wrong there?"

The voice was harsh and ungracious.

"A man's badly hurt. We want the help of a doctor."

"Go to Tremorac, then. I'm not in practice."

"But his state is desperate. It's life or death and time's precious. It's an assault, a crime. You *must* come."

There was quite a long pause, then that surly voice: "A crime at Castel Blanc! Well, wait a little. I'm coming."

After about ten minutes the door was unbolted and a man appeared. He was short and squat, with a face almost as large as a ham, and of a yellow colour. Black bushy eyebrows barred it and black bushy whiskers framed it. His mouth was grim, down-twisted; his chin jutted forward aggressively. He wore a black cape and a black cap, and carried a black bag. For a moment he stared at her. She was in her dressing-gown and bed-room slippers, while her hair hung down her back in thick braids. Evidently she puzzled him.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, Doctor," she faltered.

"Bah! I wouldn't come if I didn't want to. But I'm interested. If it was from anywhere else I'd tell you to go to the devil. Always do. They never try any more. The whole village of them can perish and I won't budge a step. I've done my share, earned my rest. They must leave me alone, confound them. But this is different. This interests me."

As he trudged ahead, she followed him down to the beach.

"Lucky for you," he growled, "the tide's far out, or you'd never have got here. Weren't you afraid to come?"

"No."

"Well, I must say you're a plucky one. What's that you're carrying?"

"A pistol."

"Dangerous for a young girl to carry that. Better let me have it."

"Thanks. I'm used to it."

"Never mind then. See, I have one too."

He showed her a glistening revolver. "Think I'd go on a trip like this unarmed. . . . You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Oh no."

"I suppose you've heard that I'm a woman-hater."

"No."

"I am. Never speak to a woman if I can help it. Wouldn't let one cross my doorway. Did you see my servant?"

"Yes."

"He's a Chinaman. Did he speak to you?"

"No."

"Good reason. He's no tongue. And tell me, why has he no tongue?"

"I don't know."

"Because I cut it out. I had to. He had cancer of the tongue and I operated on him. Cut three times but got to the root at last. Have you ever had a servant that can't speak?"

"No."

"It's ideal. Especially when he's a Chinaman. Ever been in China?"

"Never."

"Most interesting country in the world. Full of cancer. . . . But don't talk so much. Save your breath."

With surprising strides for his height he led the way across the sands. It taxed her to keep up with him. From time to time he shot questions at her. His manner was brusque to brutality, but this was not the time to resent it.

"Who's hurt?" he asked suddenly. "Is it that fool of an Englishman who bought the place?"

"No, his valet."

"Oh, only a servant. Who are you?"

"His . . . niece."

"Hum! Well, I saw the two last corpses, and I'm curious to see this. What happened?"

"I know nothing."

"I'll soon know. Here we are at the steps. I'll go first. I know the way."

As they plunged into the deep gloom of the wood he drew out an electric torch, playing it on the little pathway.

"I think of everything, you see. Hope we'll get there before the man dies."

"Do you think he'll die?"

"Haven't a doubt of it. They all do. Whoever does that job takes no chances. But he may be able to tell us something."

Peter met them at the head of the stairway, holding a candle to light their steps.

"Doctor Chavas?"

"That's right."

"Thanks for coming, Doctor, but I'm afraid it's hopeless."

"Is he still living?"

"Just. I thought he was going once or twice, but he rallied. I tried to give him brandy. I'm afraid he's lost too much blood though."

"How's he hurt?"

"His head. Crushed in like an egg-shell."

"With what?"

"A poker, seemingly."

"Did he ever recover consciousness?"

"No."

"Had he been long hurt when you found him?"

"I don't know. I found him on the floor. I lifted him up on the bed. Then I discovered . . . something else,—something I want you to see."

"Ah! All right. Lead on. I'll do all I can for him."

Peter let the doctor pass into the room, but he checked the girl.

"No, you wait outside. It won't do you any good to see this. If we need you we'll call."

They closed the door on her, leaving her in the darkness. She heard their voices, one low, the other gruff.

"Bah! it sickens me." It was the doctor speaking.

"Hush! She'll hear," came from Peter.

The voices sunk almost to a whisper. There was a scuffling of feet, intervals of awful silence. It seemed as if she waited there for ages. Now that the strain was over, a reaction was setting in. She felt as if she wanted to faint. Then the door opened and they came out.

"Better lock it and take the key," said the doctor.

Peter did so. She caught his arm.

"Is he . . . ?"

"Dead? . . . Yes."

Aghast she looked into his face. It was that of a man dazed.

"I'll let the police know first thing in the morning," went on Doctor Chavas. "Most curious case. Glad you called me. All right, don't bother to show me downstairs. I know my way out."

Nevertheless Peter lighted him to the door and locked it. When he returned, the girl was shocked at the sight of his face, its misery was so absolute.

"Let's go to our rooms," he said wearily. "I don't think there's any sleep for either of us, but we can at least lie down. Poor James! If it was only the blow on the head! . . . but there was something else, something too dreadful for words. Oh, it was horrible, horrible. . . ."

CHAPTER TEN

THE INVESTIGATION

Neither of them slept. They lay awake wretchedly, so that it was a relief when the dawn came and with it a furious

jangling of the bell. Peter arose wearily, his face like a withered leaf in the wan light.

"Six o'clock. It must be the police. They haven't lost any time."

It was the local officer of gendarmes and two of his men. Inspector Machard was a portly man, with popping eyes and a formidable red moustache.

"Monsieur MacBeth?" he demanded importantly.

"I believe so," said Peter, putting up his monocle. Officialdom always nettled him, and he adopted his most non-chalant manner.

"I want to ask you some questions before I go up to inspect the body."

"Fire ahead."

"About what time did you find it?"

"About one o'clock."

The inspector scribbled industriously in a small black note-book.

"What alarmed you?"

"I heard what I took to be a groan."

"Did you go at once?"

"No, I waited to be certain. About a quarter of an hour after, the sound was repeated. This time I got up."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"Yes, a sound like that of soft feet descending the stair leading from the attics."

"Does that stair continue to the ground floor?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know your own house?"

"I'm not particularly interested in the quarters of my servants."

"Yes," put in Pascaline. "There's another small stair at the end of the corridor, which goes to the ground floor."

"Then whoever it was must have descended by that and escaped. We must find out. How did you discover the body?"

"Lying on the floor face down."

"With what had the deed been done?"

"With a poker, evidently. It was lying by the body."

"All right. You will show us exactly how, and we will reconstitute the crime. You are English?"

"No, Scotch."

"Same thing."

"An improvement."

"And this lady?"

"Is my niece—by adoption."

"By adoption, . . . ah!"

He looked meaningly at the girl who flushed with vexation.

"Well, we'll now go up and inspect the room."

Peter accompanied them. He explained how the body had been lying and how he had found the poker. The inspector looked at the weapon closely. It was short and sturdy, of wrought iron, with a handle that was terminated in the form of two twined serpents. He swung it thoughtfully, gazing at the fireplace.

"Was there anything on the mantelpiece?" he asked.

"Yes, a candlestick with a half-burnt candle and a box of matches. I took it to light us downstairs."

"You should not have touched anything. And this poker, does it belong to the house?"

"Haven't the faintest idea. You see I bought the wretched place with all it contained. I don't know a tenth part of what I bought, even now."

This seemed to Inspector Machard an extraordinary statement. He looked sternly at Peter, pulling his long moustache.

"And who may know, Monsieur?"

"Let me see . . . Madame Marteau might. She's the cook. She's just come in."

Inspector Machard knew Madame Marteau very well indeed, but in his official capacity she was a stranger to him. "Fetch this Madame Marteau," he said sharply.

The cook came with alacrity. She seemed pleased to be summoned. There was a smirk of importance on her face, but it vanished as she cast a quick look at the figure on the bed.

"Do you recognize this fire-iron, Madame?"

Madame Marteau regarded the poker with stupefaction.

"No, sir."

"You're sure it does not belong to the house?"

"Sure."

"All right.. That will do for you both in the meantime. If I have any more questions to ask, I will call you. I will now go on with my examination."

Peter, thus ignominiously dismissed on equal terms with his cook, went downstairs fuming.

"Damn these limbs of the law," he said to Pascaline. "They almost make a man think he's committed the crime himself. The Examining Magistrate's coming this afternoon. More official pomposity, I suppose. Well, I'm going to bed again."

However, Monsieur Bertrand, the Magistrate, proved to be a very charming old gentleman with a sympathetic manner that was more effective than any amount of bullying. He was a little man with snow-white hair and dark, piercing eyes. He arrived in a car, accompanied by his Registrar.

"Terrible affair," he remarked, gazing thoughtfully at Peter. "I know how it must distress you. In all my experience I've never run across so baffling a mystery."

He looked at a page of notes he had made. "Not a ray of light, none."

"Then, have you no theory, Monsieur, as to how my poor man met his death?"

"We suppose that he must have heard a noise in the room and got up to light the candle. Then he was struck on the head from behind. It must have been a savage, short arm blow, showing that the assassin was at close quarters."

"But how could anyone get into the room? I know

James. He certainly would lock the door. As a matter of fact, I found the key on the inside."

"Then someone must have already been in the room. We must search everywhere for traces of someone having been concealed. I have not finished my report yet. I will work at it to-morrow with the help of the police doctor."

"But how ever did the murderer get away?"

"That puzzles us. There are three doors to the house, the front one, one to the kitchen and one at the back. All were found locked. You yourself unlocked the front door and locked it again. A man could unlock a door and let himself out, but he couldn't leave it locked on the inside. The windows too were securely fastened. Question: How did he get away?"

"There's a *sous-sol*, I believe."

"A very commodious one. We thought of that. We even thought he might still be concealed on the premises; so we made a thorough search from attic to cellar, but no sign of a living soul."

"And no clue?"

"Nothing, so far as we have gone. Of course, Inspector Machard and his assistants, though excellent in their way, have not the skill of real detectives. Before anything was disturbed we should have had someone from Paris. Now foot-marks, thumb-prints and so on have no value to us. Ah! I fear we have bungled sadly. We did not find even a sign of blood on the stairway."

"And the second wound, the . . ."

"Yes, that is beyond my experience, beyond my most terrible imagining. . . . Well, let's hope we'll soon clear up everything."

Sighing gently, Monsieur Bertrand tapped his notes. Peter went away with the impression that the old man was dissembling, that there was much more than he would admit.

The next two days were troubled and tormenting. Strange visitors invaded their privacy. The bell seemed to

be ringing all day long, and the maid was constantly admitting officers of the police and officials of the law. There was a great detective summoned from Paris at the last moment; and two doctors; and *fonctionnaires*, and their friends and cousins; and what seemed to Peter to be a mob of morbid sensation-mongers.

"It's infernal," he fumed. "The place doesn't belong to me any more."

Wrapped in his fur coat and stretched on his long chair, he was the picture of misery. His face looked wizened, his mouth was twisted in a grimace of disgust. Of course, the whole business had affected his heart. His breathing was laboured and he had developed a cough. He cursed everything and everybody, but his exasperation came to a head when the reporters arrived. Suzanne, the maid, admitted them, evidently impressed by their importance.

The first was a dynamic young Jew, with hair like *crêpe* and a mocking mouth. His inquisitive nose was bridged by glittering pince-nez, and the eyes behind them were keen and clever. Fashionably dressed and suavely assured of manner, he advanced and bowed.

"My name is René Laval. I am the special envoy of the *Petit Parisien* which, as you know, has over a million readers daily."

Peter was speechless. His lack-lustre eye travelled to the second of the two intruders, a little man in a long cape, brigand-brimmed hat, bat-winged tie, long curling hair and Vandyke beard, who looked as if he had strayed from the pages of Murger's "*Vie de Bohème*."

"And every one of those million readers," went on the speaker, "is eagerly interested in you."

"To the devil with your million readers," snapped Peter. "I'm not interested in them, either individually or collectively."

"But, my dear Sir," said René Laval, "you do not seem to realize how you are in the public eye. You are being ex-

ploited. All sorts of legends have already crystallized around you. Just look at this."

He took from his pocket a newspaper, and thrust it at Peter. The heading read: The CASTEL-BLANC MYSTERY, ECCENTRIC ENGLISHMAN AND LOVELY COMPANION INNOCENTLY INVOLVED.

"I don't want to read the disgusting stuff," snarled Peter. "A pack of beastly lies, no doubt."

"No doubt. That's why I come. To get at the truth. Your own story as related to me. Your personal account of the latest crime. In connection with this enigmatic affair there are circumstances so *abracadabrantic*, you might let us have the enlightenment of your own views on the matter. Also some account of yourself personally would be perused with avidity. My dear sir, living alone here like a hermit, you do not realize how much you are in the public eye."

"Damn the public eye. Please don't worry me. I'm a sick man. All I ask is to be left in peace."

"Listen," went on the audacious young man. "I see you are not very well, and believe me, I am sympathetic. But I have been sent all the way from Paris to get a story from you, and of course I cannot go back without one. Would it not be better then if I got it from your own lips, than if I have to depend on other sources for my information?"

Peter did not reply. He was looking at the reporter in a fascinated way. His eyes were fixed on a large wormlike vein that swelled on the man's left temple.

"I really have a *flair* for this sort of thing," declared René Laval. I am keen to do what I can to unravel this gruesome mystery, and you might suggest some theory to me. I am really more than an ordinary journalist. I look on journalism as a stepping stone to literature. Indeed, I have written several plays, one of which the Director of the Grand Guignol is seriously considering. You might do well, then, to have confidence in me. You will be in good hands."

"How's your heart?" said Peter suddenly.

"My heart! My dear Sir, I don't understand. . . ."

"Have you ever seen a doctor about your heart?"

René Laval was taken aback, and a little alarmed at Peter's excited manner. "No," he said. "What do you mean?"

"See a doctor at once, then," said Peter pointing a trembling finger at him. "Your heart's as big as that of an ox and it *whistles*. I've had experience and I know. You've got all the signs. Take the advice of a fellow 'cardiac' and see a specialist without delay. I'm right, you'll find I'm right. . . ."

He rose shakily and, drawing the fur coat about his shoulders, turned and stalked in the direction of the house. Then, René Laval recovered himself. "A moment," he called sharply.

Peter had taken Pascaline's arm, but they both turned. There was a click. The picturesque young man had produced a camera from under his cape and pointed it at them.

"Got him, Anatole?"

The man with the camera nodded joyously.

"Good-bye, Monsieur," called René Laval. "I'll send you a copy of the paper with my story."

That evening the little magistrate finished his investigations. He departed followed by a large clerk with a large serviette full of papers. He shook hands cordially with Peter.

"Monsieur, for the present I have completed my task. You are indeed glad to be rid of me. Oh, I know. Well, I hope I won't trouble you further. Still, one never can tell. Do you intend to remain here?"

"I don't suppose so."

"If you go, you might keep us informed of your address, so that if we need you we can communicate with you."

Mentally Peter vowed he would do nothing of the kind. If he once went away they could jolly well whistle for him. However, he replied:

"With pleasure. And may I ask if your enquiries have developed any clue?"

Monsieur Bertrand smiled gently. "That, my dear sir, is something I cannot yet announce. We think we are on the track of the assassin, but it would be premature to make any statement on the subject."

"But do you think the murder was committed by someone in the district?"

"Assuredly."

"And you suspect someone?"

"Yes, I may go so far as to admit that we have our suspicions as to the author of the crime. But there . . . I can say no more at present. We are still pursuing our investigations along certain lines, and if certain theories are verified we may come to certain conclusions which will eventually lead us to take certain steps. . . ."

With that, the white-haired old man smiled his charming smile and went away in his waiting car.

"I bet he's an old humbug," said Peter querulously. "I don't believe they have any theory at all."

"Have you?" asked Pascaline.

"Well . . . I have my ideas," he said, nodding wisely. "I'm not such a fool as everyone seems to think me."

"I don't think that, far from it."

"I may open their eyes yet. I've always fancied I had, as that reporter chap said, a *flair* for the detection of crime. If I choose to try my hand at solving the mystery, I might surprise 'em. But then, we're going away, aren't we?"

"Of course we are."

"All right. Only I've one thing to tell you: *keep your eye on the cook.*"

The following day, James was buried. The rector of the church at Tremorac conducted the service. Peter and Pascaline put on black for the occasion. There were also present Madame Marteau and her husband, the bibulous cobbler; Suzanne and the landlord of the White Goat. James was

interred in a corner of the grey-walled churchyard. Pascaline plucked a white dahlia from a near-by grave and threw it on his coffin. Peter's face was puckered and two enormous tears rolled down the creases of his cheeks.

"Let's go," he said harshly; so they walked listlessly through the graveyard, gazing at the worn, untidy stones.

"I'm looking for a nice cosy corner for myself," said Peter bitterly.

"Oh, please, don't talk like that."

"It's true. It will be my turn next."

"What rubbish!"

"It isn't. I'm walking arm in arm with death."

"If one wants to live to be a hundred, one must walk arm in arm with death."

"There's some truth in that," he admitted.

As they drove home in the local hack, both were silent. About half way, she asked suddenly: "We're going away, aren't we?"

He hesitated. "Well, perhaps not immediately. We have to get a new chauffeur first."

"I'll ask Madame Marteau to try and find some one for us. Then we'll go, won't we?"

"Well . . . I feel I owe it to poor James to remain a little longer."

"Why?"

"To see what happens next. I feel if I remained I might help to clear up the mystery of his death. You know, James was something more than a mere servant to me. He was like a friend. He knew more of my affairs than I do myself. I'll be at sea without him. Now he's been done to death in a manner most foul and devilish, and I want to see him avenged."

"You wouldn't wait for that."

"Yes, I would. But I don't want you to stay. You must go away somewhere and I'll join you later on."

"If you don't go I won't. I'll never, never leave you."

But it's bad for you to stay here. Please let's go."

For a moment he hesitated. After all, by remaining he was risking her life as well as his own.

"All right," he said with a sigh. "As soon as we get the chauffeur we'll start out."

That night he nailed up the door of her room, and between them they pushed his bed against his own door.

"Now, we have barricaded ourselves in," he said. "No one can possibly get at us without warning. If we hear a sound the automatic is at my hand. We'll leave the door between our two rooms open. After all that, let the devil himself come, I'll be ready for him."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PERIL OF THE SANDS

In Brittany there are days that stand out in pure perfection from their fellows. From dawn to dark each is a delight, a link of gold in the chain of time. The day that followed was one of these.

There was no cloud to fret the sky's serenity, but a lazy sun, kindly and cheerful. The air was soft, the landscape mellow. Bins of cider-apples glowed yellow and red, the scent of bonfires drifted across the fields. How hard on such a smiling day to realize that behind the tranquil façade of the White House lurked mystery and terror.

"Let's get away from it," suggested Peter. "Let's get in touch with the sea."

As they plunged into the tunnel of verdure behind the house, they heard the peevish cawing of the rooks. There was a hollow roar in the lower branches of the pines, as of restless water. The lion-coloured sands were basking in the sun and laced with silver streams. Round that vast arena,

in rich Autumnal tints, the arms of the land curved to where they met the shimmering satin of the sea.

"Suppose we take to our bare feet," suggested Peter.

She was a little startled at the idea but, with a pleasant sense of adventure, she agreed. On all the wide level of the sands they seemed alone, yet when they were opposite Auberon they saw a solitary figure.

"I believe it's the old fisherman," said the girl. "I hope he won't be horrid again."

Ragon shambled towards them. His pointed wooden shoes were stuffed with straw, and his old greenish coat bleached by the sun. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, but with a start he recognized them. His black-nailed, spatulate fingers plucked at his long, matted beard, and he stared at Peter in a disconcerting way.

"I thought you were dead," he muttered.

"Not yet."

"Then it was another."

"Unfortunately."

"I told you so. I told you the Beast would walk. Always at the full of the moon the blood-lust wakes. . . ."

Again he stared at Peter with his wide, shark-cruel eyes. Suddenly his tone changed.

"Want to buy some fish?" he said, uncovering his basket.

"May be. See the cook."

"Aye, Sir. I'll step up to the house."

He shambled off a few feet, then turned and laid his hand on Peter's sleeve, pushing forward that yellow, hawklike face in which the grey eyes gleamed gelidly under their frosty thatch.

"The last was the Harvest Moon; the next will be the Moon of the Hunter—the Red Moon. The Beast must have its kill. Beware, my poor Monsieur. Beware of the Hunter's Moon."

"Weird old devil," growled Peter, gazing after him. "He seems to throw a black shadow over the day."

"What does it matter to us?" she laughed. "By the next full of the moon we will be a thousand miles from here, won't we?"

"More or less, I hope. Well, let's forget the old kill-joy with his raven croak. The sun's as bright as ever and we're getting near the sea."

Bright green sea grass glistened at their feet. Every pool was mysterious with shy and secret life.

"Who are these women?" said Pascaline pointing. There were a score of them bent double over a patch of sand. Splendid brown legs bare to the thighs, supported what seemed bundles of sea-corroded rags.

"It's the wives of Auberon gathering bait for their men. They won't look up, but they're watching us."

The fisherwomen had baskets half-full of razor-fish shells. As they planted their feet firmly before them a tiny spurt of water would rise; then down they would plunge a long hooked skewer, withdrawing it in every case with a shell attached. They never paused, but through their tangled hair their wild shy eyes were regarding Peter and the girl.

"They're a silent, sullen race," he remarked. "Look to me like kelpies. Such a contrast to the workers on the land."

Leaving behind the bent and busy women, they went on to where at high tide an island stood out from the mainland. At low tide it was connected by a long spit of sand. On its sheltered side were grassy slopes and hollows, but where it faced the sea were cliffs and rocks that ran out jaggedly. It was crowned by a ruined watch tower.

They climbed up a steep beach of golden sand, and over a turfy ridge from which they could see a wonderland of savage beauty. There were sweeping yellow bays, fantastic islets, boulders piled grotesquely, black and brooding capes: all so lovely yet so desolate.

Sitting in a sunny hollow they dreamed awhile. The peace was wonderful. The sea, azure and serene, seemed asleep. Gulls in lazy flight gleamed above them; at their feet rabbits

stole out of the fern. Down a path through the whins came a herd of goats, looking at them with agate eyes, then nibbling near. It reminded Peter of Sicily. He drowsed a little, till he felt her hand on his arm.

"Come. We must be getting down. The tide is on the turn."

The sea, indeed, seemed to be waking up. It began to murmur. Long ripples ran over it. It seemed to yawn and stretch like a great monster, then to realize its rest was over. As they gained the mainland, most of the sea marsh was already covered. All the fishwives had vanished, and the boats of their men were drifting in with the tide.

"It's only coming on slowly," Peter assured her. "We can keep ahead of it."

In front, their way lay clear over the sands to the White House. Behind, the sea crawled. So, with a pleasant sense of safety, they started on their return walk. They did not hurry, for in truth they were rather tired. He was lagging a little. She surprised in his eyes a look of profound fatigue, but instantly it vanished.

"You're not unwell?" she asked.

"No, let's get on."

Although he quickened his pace, she noticed that his breathing was difficult. How glad she would be when they were safely home. They had come a little too far. She must be more careful with him in future.

Once or twice she cast a backward glance and was surprised to find how closely the sea was following. The long waves were more deeply defined and drove on now with foam on their glittering crests. Still they were half way home, and a good two hundred yards in advance of the tide.

Once more Peter lagged, and the wry twist of his lips made her think he must be in pain. Again she looked behind her uneasily. They must really hurry. The sea now presented a long front of foam, behind which wave after wave swept forward with dancing crests. There was something

inspiring in the sight, like the advance of a great army, endless, invincible, rank on rank. But this was no moment to admire it. It was now a bare hundred yards away, and seemed to be gaining.

Yet, as she looked ahead, she was reassured. The head of the bay seemed to be only half a mile away—though, to be sure, distance on the level sand was very deceptive. But already she could distinguish details of their rocky bluff. Indeed she imagined she could hear the sursurrus of the wind in the pines . . . Or was it the sonorous menace of the sea?

“We must make haste,” she told him anxiously, “or we’ll have the tide at our heels.”

Peter halted and looked back. “By Gad! Who would have thought it was so near. It’s speeding up. One would think it was angry because we’re beating it.”

They hurried now, frankly excited. Every minute counted. In front, the trees and the cliffs grew in detail. On the dyke to the right she could make out the figure of a man. He seemed to be watching them.

Now they could hear distinctly the wind in the trees, but the roar of the waves was even louder. They feared to look back. There was spite and fury in that roar. Then, suddenly, she saw that the man on the dyke was waving to them, and she heard him shout. His warning startled her and, as she turned, a cry broke from her. For the outer edge of the flood was only some twenty yards away. It was tossing and boiling in white fury; while behind it, in ridge after ridge, the sea drove down relentlessly.

“Quick! We must run,” she screamed.

Together they made a spurt. After all it would be easy. The rocks were only some three hundred yards away, and already they had covered a third of that distance. A cry of exultation burst from her.

“Safe! A last effort. Come . . .”

But she stopped. Peter had ceased to run. He was rigid, clutching at his chest. There was in his greying face

the look she knew so well. He was fighting for breath, his eyes bulging, his lips writhing. Then, with a groan, he collapsed.

As she caught him up the sea swirled round her. It seemed to splutter and leap with rage. Or rather it seemed to dance with delight at having caught them. Already it was past her, rushing faster, and she could feel the wash and surge of its increasing waves. Half carrying, half dragging Peter, she staggered on. Oh, if she could only make the beach. . . .

And now the water was up to her waist and boiling all about her. But its depth buoyed up her burden and its force drove her forward. If only she could swim . . . Alas! She knew that in another minute the tide would wash her off her feet and they would both drown miserably. She might have left him and saved herself, but the thought never entered her head. They would perish together. Nothing, she thought, could save them now. . . .

Then right in her ears she heard a shout. A man was at her side. He seemed to nip up Peter like a child.

"Follow me," he roared.

They threw themselves forward, ploughing through the waves that now rose to her breast. Once she was nearly swept off her feet when the man steadied her. Already they had gained fifty yards. Desperately she struggled but she felt her strength failing. Again the man aided her. His clutch in this swirling water alone kept her from going under. Spray drenched her, blinded her. A wave choked her. She lost her footing. He seemed to have tremendous strength, this man. Once more he was supporting her. Another fifty yards. . . . Ah! it was far, far . . . she could never make it. . . .

All at once the waters seemed to fall back impotently. She was waist-deep only, standing on the rise of the beach. A few yards further. . . .

The sea made a last thwarted rush, swept up to her

shoulders, washed her forward. Then, a strong hand gripped her and she was dragged to the shelter of a shelving rock.

“He’s fainted,” said the strange man. “I’ll carry him to the house. Run in front and get some brandy. But first, allow me to introduce myself. I’m your neighbour. My name’s Hector de Marsac.”

END OF BOOK TWO

BOOK THREE

HECTOR DE MARSAC

CHAPTER ONE

EAR OF A DOG PROPOSES

“*Bigre de bigre!*” said Jojo, staring at the soiled newspaper.

“*Sapristi!*” exclaimed Gros Bébé, glaring at the smudgy photograph.

Ear of a Dog snatched the journal from their hands. His tight-lipped face did not move a muscle.

“L’Irlandaise,” he breathed softly.

“And her *milord*,” added Gros Bébé.

“Read it,” said Jojo.

Ear of a Dog began:

“THE CASTEL-BLANC MYSTERY”

“What’s that?” demanded Gros Bébé.

“Why don’t you read the news, Head-of-a-calf?” said Jojo. “It’s that house down in the Finistère. The ‘Maison Fatale’ they call it. Everyone who goes to live there gets done in.”

“The devil! What for?”

“That’s the mystery—what for? It ain’t for money, and it ain’t for revenge. Well then—what for?”

“One also kills for love, for hate, for power,” said Ear of a Dog.

“I knew a man,” said Gros Bébé, “who killed for the fun of killing.”

“A monster,” said Jojo.

“A madman,” said Ear of a Dog.

“Well, he’s in the *bagne* now, and some day you may meet him there. But go on, little Georges. Read us about l’Irlandaise.”

Ear of a Dog continued:

From our Special Envoy.—

As there has been no fresh development during the last week in this extraordinary affair, in the hope of obtaining some new information for our readers who are following it with such interest and perplexity, I paid a visit yesterday to the village of Tremorac and to the now famous White House.

Tremorac is one of those small villages so typical of that wild and savage land of cairns and calvaries, of tempestuous coasts and desolate heaths. It is a muddle of ugly houses, drab and saturnine under a grey sky. Its inhabitants, too, so different from the gay and voluble Français of tradition, are dour, hard-faced and morose. One is constrained to recognize that they are of another race, the Celtic; and that they have little in common with their Norman neighbours. But the inhabitants of Tremorac are ultra Breton, *Breton bretonnant* pure and primitive.

I had no difficulty in finding the famous White House. It lies some six kilometres out of Tremorac, at the head of a vast and solitary bay. In front the tide goes out for miles, exposing a desolate level of sand. Its wall is of unwonted height, concealing it from the road. During the past few days the curious have come from far and near to see the famous mansion, only to be confronted by that baffling wall.

Your representative, however, rang a bell and was promptly admitted by a rosy-cheeked maid, wearing the *coiffe* of her village. In answer to my request, she ushered me in. At last! At last! I was in the grounds of the Mansion of Mystery.

It looked innocent enough, I must admit; a plain, well-proportioned house of the comfortable order. It was starkly simple in design and coloured a grimy grey. Dense foliage enveloped it on three sides, giving it that sombre touch the imagination sought. But in front was a pleasant lawn, and on it the present proprietor was comfortably installed. On my stating my business he received me with a charming courtesy and offered me a chair.

Sir MacBeth is a man of aristocratic mien, as becomes a brother of the illustrious Lord Strathbogie. He is a little under medium height, with a slim erect figure, bold features, a

severe mouth with, however, an ironical twist. His hair is almost white, contrasting with his sanguine complexion. He has light blue eyes, while a monocle adds to his air of distinction. He is extremely well groomed, and his manner suggests the soldier rather than the scholar. With him was his niece, Miss O'Neill, a young lady of exotic beauty, with whom he is at present touring Europe.

"And can you throw any light on this terrible affair?" I asked. He regarded me earnestly, with an expression that was indefinable in his pale blue eyes.—"None," he answered emphatically.

"Our readers would appreciate a first hand account of your experience on that terrible night," I suggested. He shuddered. "I'd rather not talk of it."—"I understand. The shock must have been devastating. The murdered man, I believe, was a very old and valued servant." He rose, overcome with emotion. "No, it is too painful," he said. "You will forgive me if I say nothing further. I am as you see, a sick man, and this dreadful affair has upset me altogether. Will you please excuse me."

With that he retired to the house, and I had to content myself with this slight but vivid impression of the strange couple.

I next interviewed Madame Marteau, the worthy cook of the establishment. This estimable old lady has silvery hair and an expression of cheerful rectitude. The evil odour of the house did not seem to impress her very much, for she related with gruesome gusto details of the previous crimes; she also showed me the room in which the last one had occurred, pointing proudly to a large stain on the bare wooden floor.

"You knew the other two victims, did you not?" I asked. "Yes, of course. Was I not housekeeper to them? Poor Madame Veenstone! Such a nice old lady. And Monsieur André, a charming young man."

"And the last one?"—"Ah, Monsieur James . . . We were such good friends. A gentle kind man if ever there was one."—"And have you no theory of the crime? Was it done by the same hand as the others?"—"But assuredly, Monsieur."—"But these people had no enemies here. Who could do such an inhuman deed?"—"That's it," she told me earnestly, "it isn't human. It's the work of a demon. It is done by Satan himself."

It was with some agitation she made this last statement.

"Can you tell me something of your present master?" I asked. She shook her head. "Nothing, except that he's very rich. Money doesn't matter to him at all. And he's nearly always sick. He bought this place because he wanted to be quiet and live without emotion. Though Heaven knows he's getting emotion enough, the poor man."

In conclusion I had a few words with Monsieur Bertrand, the Juge d'Instruction. Up to the present he confessed himself baffled, but hoped in a few days to arrive at a solution of the puzzle. "Is there not," I hazarded, "a peculiarly gruesome circumstance connected with the last murder?—something which has not yet been communicated to the press, but which may supply a clue to the mystery?" He started, looking at me piercingly. "There is," he admitted. "We are studying it in the light of that, but for the moment I can say no more."

So with these enigmatic words I had to be contented, and left the "House of Horror" with a profounder sense of its dark and direful mystery than I had had when I entered it. Who killed these three innocent people? I asked myself. Why was it done? Then, last and most ominous question: Will there be any more victims? Alas! Only time will show.

They had listened intently and in absolute silence. As Ear of a Dog finished, he threw down the paper and lit a cigarette; Gros Bébé was gasping; Jojo leaned forward with his precocious face of an evil boy. He was the first to speak.

"Well, we know where l'Irlandaise is, anyhow."

"Yes, and her millionaire," growled Gros Bébé.

"We've looked for them long enough," went on Jojo.

"I guess we're not the only ones that's been looking for l'Irlandaise," said Ear of a Dog suddenly.

The other two stared at him. "Who?"

"Spirelli."

"The Chief!"

"Yes."

"But he's in gaol."

"Is he . . . ? Look at that"

Ear of a Dog took from a pocket a folded green paper.

"A telegram. And from Joliet Prison. Read it."

Jojo read: "'*Savant* released to-day.' . . . But it's dated a week ago."

"Yes, he's been free a week."

"And you didn't tell us."

Ear of a Dog shrugged his shoulders. "What was the good? I had my reasons for keeping silent."

"You're too secret," snarled Jojo. "You're a deep one, little Georges. I don't like it. Did the Chief send you that?"

"Not he. You know Spirelli, his cursed sense of the dramatic. He loves to work in the dark. Likes to surprise us. No, I fixed it with one of the warders to let me know the moment he was released."

"But he isn't due out for a year yet."

"That's what I can't understand. He's pulled some string. Anyway he's free now."

"But where is he?"

"Who knows? May be very near. May be spying on us."

Gros Bébé looked round apprehensively. "Curse him, he gets on my nerves, does the Savant. Gives me the creeps. He's always so quiet, so sure."

"Yes, he's the deep one," said Jojo. "You never know what he's up to. And you can bet he's up to something right now, or he'd have showed up."

Ear of a Dog bent forward, and his eyes glittered in his pale, fixed face. "Listen," he said, "I want to tell you fellows something. I've wanted to tell you for some time. . . . I'm fed up with Spirelli."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that I'm getting out of the band. I'm not going to take orders any more from him or anyone else."

"Ha! Going on your own?"

"Unless you two like to follow me."

Jojo and Gros Bébé looked at each other guardedly.

"The Savant's always treated us like kids," said Ear

of a Dog. "Laughed at us. Thought himself superior."

"He *was* superior," put in Jojo.

"He's always demanded half the haul."

"Yes, but he did the headwork."

"And let us take the risk."

"He took the risk when they nabbed him. He drew off the police and let us get away with the stuff."

"And what have we done with it? Blown it to the last *sou*. What are we going to say when he comes back and claims his share?"

Uneasily Gros Béb  and Jojo looked at each other.

Ear of a Dog went on. "You know Spirelli. He never forgives. He's always kept faith with us and we've not been square with him. When he comes back and asks you what you've done with his share of the last job, what are you going to say?"

"And you?"

"I didn't spend it. I can account to him for my portion."

"You can. . . . Do you know, my little Georges," sneered Jojo, "I've always suspected something about you."

"What?"

"That you fixed it up with the police that the Chief should be nabbed."

Ear of a Dog shrugged his shoulders. "You can't prove it."

"If the Savant found out, he would fix you."

"You leave the Savant to me. I'll get rid of him. Listen, boys. You know Spirelli's not in our class. He was never one of us. Now, I've got something of a headpiece too, and I've got some good jobs planned. Will you join me?"

Gros B    nodded. "I'm with you, George. I never liked the Savant."

"All right," said Jojo sullenly. "I'm with you. But no more tricks."

"That's a go then. When Spirelli shows up I'll fix him. And now to business. We're going to follow up this affair."

"What?"

"L'Irlandaise and her millionaire. We're going down there."

"I knew it," said Jojo sharply. "It's the girl you're after. You're making use of us."

"I admit it's the girl I'm after, but I only want the girl for my share. All the rest you can divide between you."

"What rest?"

Ear of a Dog laughed cynically. "The man must have money on the place. We know how to make a miche cough up. If anything happens to him everyone will suppose it was done by the same person as the others."

But Gros Bébé scratched his head. "I don't like it, Georges. I don't like the idea of that house. There's something funny about that. It's all very well killing for money, but that . . . that's the work of the devil himself."

"Bah! You're afraid."

"Yes, I'm afraid. . . . Well, I'll go anyway."

"And you, Jojo?"

"I'm on."

"Right. *Bon sang!*"

Ear of a Dog stared at the soiled newspaper.

"This journal's three weeks old. They may be gone by now—gone without leaving a trace, as they did before. There's no time to lose. I'll get a car tonight and tomorrow at dawn—*en route* for Tremorac."

CHAPTER TWO

DE MARSAC'S WARNING

"Two weeks of bed and baby food," said Peter fretfully. "Don't you think I've had enough of it?"

"The doctor said three," Pascaline reminded him.

"Darn the doctor. My heart's been behaving like a little gentleman for three nights past. I'm going to get up."

A headstrong man. No use opposing him. Yet by coaxing she could usually get her own way.

"Well, just for an hour or two. And you must wait till after lunch."

However, when she returned he was in his dressing-gown, a spare straight figure, pacing up and down restlessly.

"It's the devil," he remarked, "when you want to go on high speed and you have to crawl on low. I've got the muscle and the energy, but the moment I try to do things the motor gets to racing. That reminds me, how's the new chauffeur? The atmosphere of the house hasn't affected him yet?"

"No, he seems to have no nerves."

Achille, who had been presented by Madame Marteau, was a bullet-headed ex-aviator, with as much imagination as an orang-outang. He was squat, crop-headed and had a slight squint.

"Bah! what could I be afraid of?" he assured the girl. "Didn't I do the War, four years of it, and kill a score of Boches with these two hands?"

With sudden ferocity of manner he looked capable of killing as many more, and the thought comforted her. Across the corridor from her own room slept Achille, one eye open and a big black gun under his pillow. A large hanging lamp now illumined the corridor by night; the door of her room had been fitted with a Yale lock and a bolt.

"Achille is a good mechanician," went on Pascaline. "He's putting in a system of electric bells all over the house, which will give the alarm if anyone enters."

"A good idea, and how's Mother Marteau?"

"I've persuaded her to sleep in the house with her husband. I promised her an extra two hundred francs a month. I hope you don't mind."

"Spend all you like, my dear. I'm not living on a tenth of my income. I'm going to miss James badly in that respect. I haven't the least idea of finance. How much money have we in the house?"

"There's over a hundred thousand francs in bills in the concealed pocket of your wardrobe trunk."

"Well, if I pop off suddenly it will serve you to be going on with. But I must see a lawyer and make things straight in case anything happens."

A shadow clouded her clear eyes. Peter was too fond of dwelling on the possibility of his approaching dissolution. One would imagine that he almost gloated on it. Or he had so accustomed himself to the idea that he sought to regard it with a sense of humour. He would amuse himself trying to invent original epitaphs for his tombstone, and would proudly exhibit the results.

"Monsieur de Marsac has called several times to ask after you," she remarked as if to change the subject. "Indeed, he said he might come again this afternoon."

"Ah! That's the man that dragged us from a watery grave. Deuced nice of him. Well, you might tell the Mère Marteau to send up a dozen buckets of hot water to our primitive bath-room. I'll spruce up to see him. What sort of chap is he?"

She hesitated; then: "Rather a charming man, I thought."

"What does he look like, though?"

"Handsome, I should say. Very tall, commanding rather. About forty, with a great deal of personality."

"He seems to have made quite an impression on you. Well, I'll be glad to see him."

It was about three when Monsieur de Marsac was announced. They were sitting on the lawn and Pascaline was pleased to see Peter looking so well. His long rest had given to his face a look of repose. Its hollows more resem-

bled planes. For the moment it was a clear bright face with that hint of boyishness she loved to see in him. His greeting to de Marsac was frank and eager.

The first thing one noticed about Hector de Marsac was that he had a smile of unusual charm. There was something very sympathetic about it, something almost wistful in its appeal for a common understanding. His dazzling teeth contrasted with the dark olive of his complexion and his lustreless black hair. His eyes were a very dark blue, so intense in their regard they were magnetic. He had an arched nose, bold to arrogance, and with an upward flare of delicate nostrils. For the rest his face was cast in classic mould. It was the face one could imagine in a young Roman general of the time of Aurelian, the face one sometimes sees in an actor of tragic parts. As he came forward his manner was grave and friendly.

"Ah, Monsieur, I am so glad to see you on your feet again."

"It's owing to you I'm on my feet at all. My niece has no doubt already expressed our gratitude, but now let me thank you in my turn."

"Oh, don't mention that, my dear fellow. I merely pulled you out of the water. Anyone would have done the same, and I am more than rewarded if it has entitled me to your acquaintance."

"You underrate what you did. But it means a great deal to us. I hope time will allow me the opportunity of proving my gratitude. You have already met my niece."

"Mademoiselle and I are almost old friends," smiled de Marsac.

There was something very winning in his manner. A man of unusual force and intelligence. Peter grew animated as he talked, and de Marsac won from the girl a look of gratitude. Very happily she served tea.

"How well you speak English," observed Peter.

"I ought to. I am a member of the English bar. I love to

“speak it and am happy to have this opportunity. I have so few chances now to improve my English. Since I have been appointed a Judge of the Assise Court at Rennes, I do not meet the cosmopolitan people I used to. I am becoming sadly provincial. Ah! how I envy you your freedom. I want to travel, to be a Citizen of the World. Most of all I envy you your opportunities for sport, big game trips, and that sort of thing. It has always been my dream to be a Nimrod, but alas! my official duties. . . . Well, perhaps, some day.”

“Of course. You are young.”

“And ambitious, unfortunately. Otherwise I should chuck law and go in for lions. Ah no. I fear I will never find time to hunt them. I must content myself with the few short weeks of shooting I enjoy down here. By the way, I want to ask your permission to fit up a shooting shelter on the point of your estate that juts over the sand. It’s unequalled when the ducks are fighting in the evening.”

“Delighted. Consider the place yours.”

“You’re too kind. Won’t you join me? I have a spare gun that’s quite good.”

“No, not just yet. Perhaps later. I might come and watch you though. I think my heart would stand that. It’s a bit off, you know.”

“So I hear. You must be careful. But really you look very well. I must congratulate you on the way you have picked up. Mademoiselle, you will soon have him fit again.”

“Not if he smokes so many cigarettes. That makes his third.”

“Yes, we must take them from him. I won’t smoke any more just to set the good example.”

Looking into his serene, smiling face, the girl felt that she had found a friend, perhaps an ally. His manner seemed to embrace them both in a way almost affectionate. Already she could see a great change in Peter. He was talking eagerly and without reserve. De Marsac was now content to

listen, and he did so with a grave and gentle courtesy, his handsome face intent and sympathetic. She left them together for a little.

Immediately they were alone, de Marsac's manner changed. He bent forward tensely. Into his dark, eloquent eyes had come a strangely stern look.

"Why did you take this house?" he asked.

"I didn't know. A whim."

"But are you not afraid to remain here?"

"For myself, no."

"But for her, your niece?" There was a vibrating note in the man's deep voice.

"I never thought . . ." Something in the dark eyes that looked so steadily into his made Peter uncomfortable.

"You never thought there was danger for her. . . . There is danger for all who live in that accursed house. Look at it now, so innocent in the sunshine, so placid, so inscrutable. Yet, it's a veritable death trap. Ah! how I wish I could fathom its mystery."

He sighed, and stared for a moment at that greyish white facade, stencilled with its tall black windows.

"You know," he went on, "I suppose it's because I am your neighbour that I feel so strongly the shame of those undiscovered crimes. And no doubt, too, as a servant of Justice. Believe me, we have been terribly exercised about it. We have done more than anyone thinks to get at the secret, but it still baffles us. I am, of course, not directly concerned with that department of the Administration, but I have all the reports sent me, and I assure you it is the matter that is worrying us more than all others in France to-day. Of course we will get the assassin in the end, but perhaps not before more mischief has been done. That is why I want to beg of you, beg most earnestly for your own sake, and more for the sake of that beautiful young girl, to leave here as soon as ever you can."

"I understand. We intended going next week. I'd like to stay and see it out, but for her sake . . ."

"Yes, go. Sooner if you can. I hate to say this; for I enjoy your company, and I think we would be friends, but . . ."

"We can be friends in any case. Well, I'll take your advice."

"Good. And while you are here, if ever you need my help, no matter where I may be, let me know at once and I'll come. Do you know, Monsieur, what is one of the greatest ambitions of my life?"

"No."

De Marsac's face hardened, grew stern almost to austerity. For a moment he was the personification of Justice, lofty, incorruptible. His voice was almost passionate as he spoke:

"To sit in judgment on the author of these crimes and to sentence him to the guillotine. . . . But here's Mademoiselle. We must not alarm her."

"What have you two been talking of?" asked Pascaline.

"Of hunting, chiefly, hunting dangerous beasts," said de Marsac.

"Have you done so?"

"No, but I hope to. Well, it's time to be going. I fear I have tired your patient."

"Not at all. You've done me a power of good," said Peter. "Come as often as you like."

The two men shook hands warmly and, as de Marsac went away, Pascaline had the impression of the passing of a personality, gracious and protecting.

"Isn't he a fine man?" she said.

"Yes, it isn't often I take to a stranger like that. He wants us to visit his château."

"I'd love to. That is, if it wouldn't be too much for you."

"No, in a day or two we'll arrange it."

CHAPTER THREE

THE TWO VISITORS

Whether it was owing to the excitement or to the cigarettes, on the following day Peter re-discovered his heart; and, as it happened, on that very afternoon he had two unexpected visitors.

Pascaline received them. The first was the Abbé Grégoire. After the opening salutation he sat staring at her solemnly with protuberant eyes. Why had he come, she wondered. Was it out of curiosity, or from a desire to be friendly? She could never be friends with him, she decided: his big face was so rugged and nobby, like the butt of a stunted oak, and it was blue-black in spite of a recent shave. Evidently a very hirsute man. Hair sprouted from the backs of his fingers and from the point of his nose. Divested of his clerical garb he might have posed as a Spanish brigand. But his forehead was intellectual and contrasted with his sensual lips and heavy jaws.

"I am sorry your uncle is indisposed," he said hesitatingly. "I brought some chapters of my history of Gilles de Bretagne with me. I would have liked to read them to him. He seemed to take an interest in the subject."

"A nice cheerful subject for a sick man," she thought. But she said:

"What a pity! I'm sure he would have been delighted." The Abbé took a roll of manuscript from the pocket of his skirt and looked at it wistfully, then looked at Pascaline and sighed.

"Perhaps Mademoiselle would care to listen?"

"With pleasure," she assured him in a voice that lacked enthusiasm. What a bore this Abbé was! She wasn't the least interested in the Greatest Monster in all History.

"Let me offer you a glass of wine first, Monsieur l'Abbé. And how is the book progressing?"

"Slowly, very slowly. There is so much to be done; the field is so fruitful. Already I have written over half a million words."

"Mon Dieu!"

"Yes, but of course I will prune it. However, it will be a big book. I find so much to say. Here in this country where his misdeeds were done, the very soil reeks of inspiration. His spirit seems to haunt the air."

"How dreadful! I hope he doesn't haunt you personally."

"He comes to me sometimes in my dreams. But that is easily understood. The subject enthralls me. It has been for me almost an obsession. Yet it is only in that way great masterpieces are produced."

The Abbé, bending towards her, began to show signs of excitement. "You know, Mademoiselle, if only I could get permission to dig in the courtyard of Le Gildo Castle, it would put the crowning touch to my labours."

"But can't you?"

"No, someone thwarts me, someone whose influence is stronger than mine."

"Perhaps he also wants to write a book on the subject."

"I have thought so too. Whoever he is, he does everything he can to defeat my purpose. And I know that buried under that courtyard are irrefutable proofs of my theories, but I cannot get at them. It is galling, is it not?"

"Very. Well, don't read me anything gruesome. You know, we have all we want of that here in our midst."

"Ah! the death of your poor domestic. I solemnly warned you, did I not? Have the police no clue?"

"No, I don't think so."

"And they think they're smart, the police. Well, I could tell them a thing or two."

"Have you got a clue?"

"Ha! I'm not saying anything—at present. But my eyes and ears are open, and we'll see. . . ."

"You're very mysterious, Monsieur l'Abbé. Why don't you do the amateur detective?"

"I may, I may. . . . But now, if you permit, I'll read to you the first chapter of my book."

So, for the next half hour, the Abbé droned and Pascaline drowsed. She was thankful Peter was not there. His politeness could not have withstood the strain. It was all so aridly historical and so long winded. She was feeling she could not stand any more of it when again the bell jangled. What a relief if it should be de Marsac! It was not; however. It was the Doctor Chavas.

He made a grotesque figure, squat and broad in his hooded black cape, with a black *béret* pulled over his large ill-shaped head; and his grim mouth had a sardonic smile of greeting.

"My dear young lady," he began, "I am sorry to disturb you, but I heard that Monsieur MacBeth was visible again and I have an important suggestion to make to him. I . . .

Suddenly he stopped. He had just caught sight of the Abbé Grégoire who had risen and was stuffing his manuscript back into his pocket. The two men glared stonily at each other.

"You will please excuse me, Mademoiselle," said the Abbé stiffly. "I am obliged to go now. I did not realize it was so late. . . . *Bonjour, Monsieur.*"

"*Bonjour, Monsieur!*"

The salutation was snapped out as the two men passed each other. Rather amusedly Pascaline noted it and wondered. As she went with the Abbé to the door, she ventured to remark: "Monsieur Chavas does not seem very sympathetic to you."

"Sympathetic! I should think not. An atheist, a mocker, an enemy of the Church! How could I tolerate such a man?"

"But men of science are usually all that."

"A queer man of science! A vivisectionist. He spends his time making experiments on helpless animals. One can hear their screams as one passes his house. He even cut out his servant's tongue. Why? To keep him from telling the dreadful things that go on in that *abattoir* of his. An evil man."

"I hope he's not by any chance writing a rival book on Gilles of Brittany."

"He's capable of it. He's capable of anything, even of . . ."

The Abbé stopped suddenly and nodded darkly in the direction of the White House. Then, with an abrupt bow, he strode away.

"Mad, quite mad," thought Pascaline as she returned to where Doctor Chavas still stood.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor."

"Not at all. Can I see Monsieur your uncle?"

"I'm afraid not. He's resting and I don't want to disturb him."

The long, ivory-coloured face with its framing of rank whisker was turned in the direction of the house.

"Quite sure I can't see him?"

"Yes. Any message I can take?"

"I've got a theory suggested by the last crime. I want to put it before him."

"I'd rather you wouldn't, even if he was quite well. It might excite him."

"But it might interest him."

"I'd rather it didn't. It's all so needless. We're going away in a very few days, and we want to forget this dreadful business."

"As you will. I thought it might intrigue him. . . . By the way, it's none of my business, but—may I ask if the Abbé Grégoire is very friendly with you?"

"Not terribly. Why?"

"Because he's a sinister man, a ghoul. He haunts graveyards. He's even been seen digging into graves."

"But he's a priest."

"Dressed like one. I'm glad he's not a friend of yours. Be careful of him. He's . . . well, I can't say. There are things, Mademoiselle, that pass your comprehension."

"You frighten me."

"You would be still more frightened if I told you all I know. Did you notice his teeth? They're like a wolf's. Well, I'm on the track of a certain wolf, even now. It may be our friend the Black Abbé. I'm not saying any more. We'll see. . . ."

He jerked his big head forward, so that his teeth clicked. For a moment he reminded her of a bear. And it was with a grunt of good-bye he left her.

"Another madman," she sighed. "And how disagreeable! What a pair of visitors! I wish someone nice would come for change."

As if in answer to her thought, de Marsac came. But it was six o'clock and he was in a furious hurry.

"I'm off to Paris to-night," he told her. "I have a car waiting and just time to catch the train. But I wanted to inquire how your uncle is."

"Not quite so well. In bed really."

"I'm so sorry. I'd like to have seen him before I go. You know, I took a great liking to him. You must get him well quickly."

"I'll do my best."

He held her hand a moment, gazing down into her face that seemed palely luminous in the dusk.

"Remember, if you want me, if anything should happen that I can be of any use to you, don't hesitate to telegraph. My address will be the Traveller's Club of which we are both members. Well, good-bye for a few days."

His sudden going seemed to deprive her of a much needed friend, and it was with a feeling of foreboding she returned to the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

Additional lamps everywhere had given the house a look of comfort and a feeling of security. It was the duty of the bullet-headed Achille to light these lamps and now, as Pascaline crossed the lawn, she saw window after window beacon to brightness. Soon the house had the air of being illumined for a fête, but this exaggeration of light only served to make the surrounding darkness more profound.

Achille was a comfort in his way. A stolid practical man, he was always devising something new in the way of efficiency. His present scheme was to make the house "assassin-proof" and in its development he displayed enthusiasm. His mechanical alarms were everywhere, so that at night the house became a vast trap set for a mysterious marauder. Going about after dark, owing to the electrical ingenuity of Achille, was a thrilling experience as well as a nervous ordeal. And at the centre of it all, he slept lightly, his big black pistol under his head.

"We'll get the devil yet," he would say exultantly. "Perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow, we'll nail him to the door."

His only fear was that the devil might not come again. From the lawn Pascaline saw Madame Marteau putting the finishing touch to her dinner, and Suzanne setting the dining-room table. They dined at seven. At eight the servants, aided by the Père Marteau, ate their supper. About nine Susanne would return to her home, accompanied a bit of the way by Achille; Mother Marteau would wash the dishes, accompanied by Monsieur Marteau who smoked his pipe. About half past nine the two would mount heavily to their room; then Achille would return, lock up, set his alarms and retire. By ten the entire house would be still and presumably asleep.

On this evening, much to the surprise and pleasure of Pascaline, Peter appeared for dinner. His long rest had reposed him; a hot bath had freshened him up; he looked well and cheerful. With his stubborn regard for convention he had dressed for dinner. He insisted on doing so even when he felt most wretched.

"I believe you'd dress for dinner on a desert island," she once told him.

"Of course," he answered cheerfully. "If there was no one else to dress for, I'd dress for God." And there was no irreverence in his statement.

She threw off the gloom she had felt after the going of de Marsac, and the dinner was unusually gay.

"I'm thankful I escaped the doctor and the priest," Peter said when she told him of her visitors, "but I sympathize with you. Too bad I missed Marsac though. When will he be back?"

"In a few days."

"Well, I hope he returns before we shove off."

It gladdened her to see him in such good spirits. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten that he believed he had an early rendez-vous with the Grim Reaper. Indeed, as they discussed the future, he talked as if his lease of life had been indefinitely prolonged. They went over their plans and it was ten o'clock when he went to bed.

Usually she preceded him, but to-night she felt strangely wakeful. The friendliness of the fire tempted her to linger, so squatting on the hearth before it she dreamed a while. The better to enjoy the cheerful flames she turned the lamp very low.

Sitting there in the glow of the wood-fire, she made a pretty picture. The contrast was vivid between the coiled mass of her gleamy black hair and the pearly pallor of her face. Her features were exquisite in their clear-cut delicacy. Her sensitive lips, slightly parted, gave to her mouth an expression of childlike sweetness. From the tilt of her chin

to her breast the long line of her throat was lovely in its curve. So there, with hands folded on her lap, she lost herself in reverie.

She was thinking of the days when she was little Callie O'Neill, pale child of the Latin Quarter, going to the communal school in a black sateen *tablier* with a serviette of books under her arm. Passing the Closerie des Lilas, she might see her big, black-bearded father, pipe in mouth and glass at hand. He spent hours in dreaming, just as she was doing now. He wrote what he considered poetry, and indeed when he died she had inherited a scrap book of it. It was really all she did inherit, but it had somehow been lost in the shuffle. Probably it had been meritless, yet she wished she had it now. A weak, shiftless man. A poor neglected child. How often she would spend the entire evening alone. Fortunately she had stacks of lessons, for in her school they worked the children mercilessly. But she had often wept while she toiled over them. The last words of her father were to beg her forgiveness, and to pray the Mother Mary to protect her. No doubt he suffered agony as he thought of his sensitive child left to the cold mercy of an uncaring world.

Then her long years in the Convent. Stray incidents came back to her. The soup she ate morning, noon and night. It was so bad she shut her eyes to swallow it. Then one day she happened to open them and found a cockroach in her spoon. And the salad, big coarse leaves of lettuce, more like cabbage (the Sisters had the hearts). It was brought in tubs and served by two Sisters with their hands, slapped on the plates. They had to eat everything, leave a clean plate. And the prudery, too. If male visitors passed through the rooms, the girls were forbidden to look at them, and at night they were made to undress under their nightgowns. Funny now to think of all that, but perhaps it had been for the best.

After that her life had become fantastic, and it had kept

on being fantastic. Perhaps some day it might be normal again, but there was no sign of that just yet. As she thought of the future, she was afraid. Well, she was helpless; she must just take things as they came. . . .

Suddenly, as she sat there, she looked round her apprehensively. A tongue of flame that had been licking the log was drawn in, and there was only the glow of the embers. Shadows surged into the silent room; the faint light could no longer beat them back. As she looked about her, the stark walls seemed to stare at her grimly. Shadows, more shadows, crowding thicker, seeming to mock her. With all the others sleeping upstairs, she felt curiously cut off. A sense of panic seized her.

Then she controlled herself. How foolish of her to feel like that! She rose to turn up the lamp and saw that it had gone out. . . . Steady there! She would light it from the fire. She was turning to do so when her eyes went to the window and remained staring. . . .

What did she see? Nothing. That was it—*nothing*, not even the ghostly shrubbery beyond the terrace. What startled her was that the window was un-shuttered. How careless of Achille! As she had been sitting before the fire, anyone might have been looking in on her. The thought made her shiver and again she stared at the window. But it was quite black. The late moon had not yet cleared the parapet of pines and a baffling darkness steeped the garden. Ah, that Achille! Perhaps someone *had* been looking in on her. If there lurked in the blackness any evil creature of the night, how could it help being drawn to that lighted window? The thought was strangely disquieting, and a shudder ran through her. . . .

Then suddenly her heart seemed to tighten. Someone *was* looking in on her. She was not looking at the window now, but she knew it. Eyes were riveted on her, eyes malignant, menacing. She felt them. She dared not turn, she was afraid. Yet—she must force herself. . . . Bah! she was

a fool. There was nothing . . . nothing. The window was blind, a frame of blackness. Its emptiness stared back at her, and the shadows behind it massed more heavily. Yet it fascinated her, that blank window, so that she continued to stare. . . . And as she did so, the conviction grew on her that there was something there, man or beast—something.

Softly she shrank into the gloom on the other side of the fireplace. The glow of the embers crimsoned the wall across the room, but where she stood she was hidden. Terror was growing in her. Her heart seemed to thud in her chest and her breathing was rapid. Trembling, she waited for she knew not what.

And as she waited, the thing she dreaded came. She choked back the scream that rose to her lips, and with her hands pressed over thumping heart, wild-eyed, she stared at the window.

No longer was it empty. A face was pressed against it, a face of such horror and bestiality her flesh seemed to creep at the sight. That face was all she could see, for the body was engulfed in the darkness. It was like a corpse face emerging from a black pool. It had all the colour of a corpse. Its pallor was the bluey pallor of a flounder's belly. From black pits glared maniacal eyes. A hairy lip, curling back in a snarl, revealed a gleam of wolfish teeth, and from the mouth drooled yellow foam. A moment only she saw it, then it was gone.

For a long time she stood there, too terrified to move. Would it return? Oh, the horror of it! That face glabrous white! Those wild and lurid eyes! She felt sick, faint. She sank to the floor, but her eyes never left the window, now so blank again. And to think of it! The Thing had been watching her as she sat by the fire, gloating over her, drawing murderously near. As she drew back it had pressed forward seeking her. Now the night had swallowed it again. But it was still out there, waiting, watching.

That mask of horror and madness! It would haunt her to her dying day. Then suddenly she thought that it reminded her of someone, someone she knew. It was such a faint baffling resemblance it eluded her. Once or twice it almost came to her, then she lost it. Who could it be? Yet the conviction grew. Somewhere she had seen someone who reminded her of that face she had seen in the window. . . .

Ah no. It was an absurd fancy. She must not let her imagination run riot like that. She would tell no one of what she had seen. And had she really seen it? Was it not imagination, the projection of her fear? So suddenly had it come, so swiftly gone,—a flickering vision on the pane, more like a spectre than a thing of life. She was so unnerved, so terror-stricken. . . .

Well, she must get back to bed. How she dreaded that dark hall and the empty stairway with its tenebrous shadows! But she must face it. If the Thing entered the house and found her there . . . ! In her room she would be safe. Thank Heaven the corridor was lit. There was Achille, Peter; even the thought of the Marteauss brought comfort.

So keeping in the shadow, she gained her room. She bolted the door after her and dropped on her bed. Everyone seemed asleep. She would disturb no one. For the moment she would suppose that what she had seen had been the creation of her fevered fancy; but there would be no sleep for her that night.

CHAPTER FIVE

GROS BÉBÉ IS AFRAID

The evening lamps were being lit in Tremorac when three men in a swift Panhard drove up to the White Goat. Host

Tardivel, that lean, long, bristly man, looked up from the bowl of cider he was drinking with Yves the baker and Yvon the butcher. He appraised the visitors according to his standard,—rough-looking; sportsmen probably; come down to have a blaze at the ducks; good spenders, no doubt.

Gros Bébé, Jojo and Ear of a Dog had covered the five hundred odd kilometres between Paris and Tremorac in a little under twelve hours.

“Rotten roads you’ve got round hereabout,” growled Gros Bébé. “How about the *popotte* and beds for the night?”

Patron Tardivel declared he would do his best for the gentlemen. There would be cabbage soup and an omelette, and some fired mackerel and a fat chicken; and if the Messieurs wished he had a Champagne not too sweet, and a fine old brandy. So they had a *pernod* all round and the guests declared themselves satisfied. The landlord of the White Goat was properly impressed. No side, but perfect gentlemen. They stood him drink after drink, and after his fifth he became communicative. He told them things they wanted to know without having the air of wanting.

That evening, owing to the numerous treats, the clients of the White Goat went home more bemused than usual, and the three visitors had absorbed much information. Particularly about the White House. Host Tardivel, indeed, was rather proud of its gruesome notoriety and enlarged on the particular atrocity of the Crimes.

“. . . And he certainly arranged them well, that fellow there. Their guts was wound around their gory necks. Some think it’s a human, some a demon; but at least it’s good for trade. You’ve no idea the number of parties that’s come to Tremorac just to see the ‘Maison Maudite.’ Not that they can see much, with all that wall like a penitentiary.”

“Anyone living there now?” demanded Jojo with elaborate indifference.

"An Englishman who bought the place, not knowing what had happened in it. Poor idiot! I'll bet he's sorry now. I'll wager he'd be glad to sell again for a song. Now, there's a chance for one of you gents to get a fine property dirt cheap."

"Not me," said Gros Bébé. "I don't want no murder house."

"Is he alone?" asked Ear of a Dog.

"No, his niece is with him. At least he says it's his niece. They tell me she's mighty pretty. But I haven't seen them. They never go out."

That night the three men in a large, barnlike bedroom conferred softly.

"It's them, all right," said Jojo hoarsely. "They're there at our mercy."

"I don't like it," grumbled Gros Bébé. "That assassin business. What's the matter with the police? A man that kills for the fun of killing! The guillotine's too good for a *type* like that. A monster. Well, I hope there's good money in the job."

"Whatever there is," said Ear of a Dog, "you two will have it all. When we've made the swell cough up and left him with an affectionate souvenir or two, we'll shoot back to Paris with l'Irlandaise. She's all I want."

"Bah! A skirt. What would you do with her?" demanded Gros Bébé contemptuously.

"That's my affair."

"Why, of course, he'd make her earn money for him like any other *fille*," sneered Jojo.

Next day, well muffled, the three separated, and individually reconnoitred the neighbourhood. From behind the high grey wall of the White House there came no sound of life. Yet there had been visitors. Jojo had seen a little broad man in a black cape go in, and a tall priest come out. Ear of a Dog wandering over the wide sands had glimpsed the cold slate roof through a rift in the gloomy trees. Sit-

ting on the beach he had gazed up at the beetling cliff, overhung with sombre, ivy-clad pines. He had decided that the best way to enter was by the path up the rock. Gros Bébé had studied the lay of the land to the right, considering the little path by the sea marsh and the dyked meadows, in case an escape might be necessary in that direction. He had encountered no one but an old and very morose fisherman, who had looked at him with an eye as cold and grey as one of his own fish. All three men decided that they did not like the place. They felt out of their element; they would be glad when they were back once more on the Boulevard de Belleville.

"*Bigre de bigre!*" said Gros Bébé with feeling, "I don't take to this cold, cursed country. Everyone seems mad and strange. Me, I'm a Parisian of the *faubourg*, and I don't understand these peasants. Like barbarians they are. No refinement. Well, to-morrow night, praise the gods, I'll be back in my own corner of the little bar of Roger the Hunchback in La Villette."

Their plans were to leave the White Goat late in the afternoon and drive to Rennes. Then, when darkness fell, they would double back and draw up the car in a dark grove. Towards midnight they would break into the house. Driving all night by the light of the moon, they would be in Paris early next day. There was the cook and her husband and a chauffeur. But they had a supreme contempt for domestics. Fools and cowards who would throw up their hands at once. If not, the worse for them. A sick man, a slip of a girl, a lonely house—could any job be easier?

So they looked forward to the evening with neither doubt nor fear. At ten o'clock they had the car backed into a bit of a wood and quietly made their way down to the beach. It was too early yet. They must wait till they could be sure everyone was asleep. . . .

But somehow the waiting began to affect their nerves. Perhaps it was the moon. In Paris one never noticed the

moon; but here it was so big and bright, and just seemed to boss everything. It steeped the whole land in dreamy peace; it created a sense of mystery; it made the stillness even more intense. Yes, the moonlight seemed to play upon their nerves, so that as the time drew near they were becoming high-strung, even a little jumpy.

There, in that unearthly silence, they waited, three city rats who loathed the land and longed for their gutters again. Nevertheless the moon would aid them, would serve to light their way. Only . . . everything seemed to be unreal, to be coated with a silver solution, strange in form and colour. And that silence! It was creepy, growing finer and finer in its essence. They themselves seemed to be growing unreal to each other, their faces painted white, their eye sockets *bistre*. Much longer in that relentless moonlight and they might have shrunk from the job. It was making them imaginative, impressionable, morbid. It was rousing in them that sense of fate which is deep in the heart of every criminal, and which tells him that near or far a tragic doom awaits him.

They could see the roofs of Auberon like platinum in the moon and once, it seemed, a grey shape slipped across the intervening sand between two brooding cliffs. It might have been human, it might have been a beast. Again it might have been nothing. Their eyes could have deceived them. All the same, Gros Bébé looked again, and again his heart was troubled.

So, as they waited, the moon worked its witchery on them, stirring their primitive instincts of fantasy and fear, till the world about them became weird, mysterious and uncanny.

"Well, let's get to work," said Gros Bébé at last. "I can't stand any more of this. What was that?"

It was only the hoot of an owl, but it startled them. Then, as they climbed up the narrow path, they heard midnight tolling from the steeple of Tremorac. The hour was well chosen.

Ear of a Dog led the way. He was less susceptible than

the others to the sorcery of that malignant moon, yet the abrupt plunge from shine to shade was grateful to him. Darkness was his friend. He flashed a torch before him and clutched an automatic. After him came Jojo similarly armed. Then Gros Bébé carrying his kit of tools in a strip of canvas.

At the top of the pathway they came to the old pigeon house and circled round it, regarding it distrustfully.

"Looks like a kiosk on the Boulevard," said Jojo. "Wish it was. Don't suppose there's anyone inside."

"Seems to me I heard something moving," whispered Gros Bébé who had his ear to the door.

"Pah! Your nerves are rotten. A rat! Who would live in a hole like that?" sneered Ear of a Dog.

Nevertheless he tried to pierce the darkness of the small window with his torch, but the cobwebs baffled him.

"Shall I force the door?" asked Gros Bébé.

"No, come on. We're wasting time."

The trail leading to the house was vague and tortuous. Twice they missed it and found themselves tangled in clutching underbrush. However, they arrived at last at the rear of the building, and here Ear of a Dog assumed the leadership. He flashed his torch on the row of ground-floor windows.

"All shuttered. Strongly too. It will take time to get one of these open. Wait there. I'm going round to the front of the house."

In a moment he was back. "There's a window unprotected giving on the terrace. Jojo you stay here and guard the line of retreat. Bébé, come with me."

Gros Bébé followed to where the terrace was bathed in the light of the moon. All the windows were shuttered but this one. The fat man was the mechanic of the band. To cut a hole in the pane and unfasten the latch was easy for him. Working silently and skilfully, he soon had it open.

"Now you wait and watch," commanded Ear of a Dog. "No need to make more noise than necessary. I'll get the

lay of things, then we can decide on our plan of action."

Like a shadow he slipped into that gloomy interior; but Gros Bébé, realizing what a substantial shadow his own was, crept back into the shrubbery. So the minutes passed: Jojo gazing up at the dark rear of the house cowered lower in the gloom and wondered what was happening; Gros Bébé crouched in the bushes looked up at its gleaming front and wondered also. Not a sign from Ear of a Dog. How the time was long! . . .

Gros Bébé began to grow anxious. Half an hour must have gone since his partner entered that inscrutable house. Its silence was appalling . . . yet once Gros Bébé started. He thought he heard a dull thudding. It seemed to come from the other end of the building, but it might have been the stamping of a horse in the stables. Yes, it sounded just like that. Still his nervousness increased till he found himself actually trembling. Oh, for the excitement of action! But this deadly suspense in the frozen calm of the moon was demoralizing. . . . Another long spell of silence in which he could hear his heart flopping under his fat ribs. Then, suddenly, appallingly, a shriek.

And what a shriek! It seemed to rend the night like a shearing blade, so that the very silence shrank back with shuddering echoes. An awful pause . . . then shriek on shriek fraught with unutterable horror.

What was happening? Who was screaming? Was Ear of a Dog in danger? Gros Bébé was no coward, but he faltered. Should he blunder into that black, mysterious house, exposing himself to its unknown danger? . . . Yes, he would go.

Springing onto the terrace, he made for the window. Then he stopped and uttered a cry. Someone was standing in the frame of the open window, looking down on him. He was not afraid of anything human, but this seemed more like a demon. He could not have described it, yet the impression it made on him was one of utter horror. His hair seemed to crisp on his

scalp and his whole flesh cringed. With a choking gasp he spun round and ran as if a thousand devils were after him.

Jojo, white as pie-crust and pistol in hand, sprang out at him.

"What is it, for God's sake?"

"The foul fiend himself. Look!"

Gros Bébé did not halt a moment in his flight, but Jojo looked—then he, too, ran like a madman.

So, crazed with fear, they tore through the bushes while after them, bounding like a beast of prey, something followed in pursuit.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

On gaining her room Pascaline pushed her bed against the door. After which, she looked inside the big black wardrobe. There was no other place of concealment and the window was so high that without a ladder no one could reach it. Nothing to fear from that quarter. The moon had now topped the pines and was shining insolently in, so she drew the lace curtain, blurring the light. Then, lying down without undressing, she tried to sleep.

She felt safe enough, but she was still trembling. She could not forget the face she had seen at the window. Could the Thing get into the house? The conviction grew on her that it could. Yet she had no reason to think so. Every door, every window was closed tight; only by breaking in could anyone enter. Yet . . . the conviction grew stronger. Not only could the creature get into the house, but it *was* in the house. Even now, with malignant cunning, it was drawing closer to them. She could *feel* its presence. She wanted to scream.

In the corridor there was a loose board that creaked when

one trod on it; and now, listening tensely, she heard that tell-tale sound. Yes, something was crawling stealthily along the corridor, even now was opposite her door. The door had a brass knob and as, wild-eyed, she stared at it, she saw it turn slowly. Then the door creaked as if someone were putting a weight on it . . . but after a moment the handle slowly sank back again. Fortunately all the other doors were locked. To her strained hearing she could believe that each was being tried in turn. No use. Tonight at least the assassin would be foiled.

Should she give the alarm? To do so would be to allow the intruder to escape. Better to wait till something really happened. Everything was quiet now. It was probably creeping upstairs, seeking some victim. Fortunately the Marteau *ménage* were double-locked in their room. Ugh! that face . . .

She lay in the stillness, straining her ears for the least sound. Again she imagined she heard that stealthy footstep in the corridor. Again she fancied there was a pawing touch on her door. For a moment she had a sensation of physical nausea. Then it passed. Had the creature gone?

She felt braver, now that the danger seemed over. She was sorry she had not made an effort of some kind, touched for instance the electric bell that communicated with the room of Achille. That intrepid warrior would have been up with a bound and after the intruder like a tiger. But she had been afraid of anything like that,—danger, a fight, bloodshed. Yet it was what she should have done. Well, it was too late now. . . .

Or was it? As she listened it seemed as if somewhere in the house below she heard the sound of a dull blow. . . . Another . . . then another. Three of them with an interval between. The last time she was certain. The sounds came from the extreme end of the house. Softly she rose, opened the door of Peter's room, and tiptoed to his bed.

"There's someone in the house," she whispered.

Drowsily he raised himself. "Of course. There's you and I. All of us."

"Yes, but I mean someone who doesn't belong. A stranger."

"You mean you think— *It?*"

"Yes."

Peter was intent now. They both listened.

"Did you hear anything definite?"

"Three distinct blows. It seemed to come from the kitchen."

"Strange! It might be what you think."

Again they listened acutely. "Shall I wake Achille and go down?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid"

"Well, whatever it is can't do us any harm, seeing we're locked in. We're all right anyway." Then, as if ashamed of his selfish feeling of personal security, he went on: "Are we all right? Achille, the Marteauss? In this awful house you never can tell. It's all so quiet out there, probably I'd better see if nothing's happened."

With that he rose and put on his dressing-gown.

"I can at least make sure the others are safe. No need to investigate downstairs till the morning; but at all events we'll see that everything's all right up here."

He unlocked his door and, browning in hand, stepped into the corridor. It was empty, lit clearly by the overhead lamp, and the door of Achille was tightly closed.

"Shall we awaken him?" she whispered.

"Dangerous. Achille is one of the kind who shoots first and thinks afterwards. No, he's all right. I can hear him snoring strenuously."

"And the Marteauss?"

"Even more unpleasantly. Don't you hear a sound like a fret-saw mingled with an asthmatic tin whistle? Let's go back to our rooms. The domestic staff is safe."

"Wait. Don't you *smell* something?"

"True. A loathly odour. Something familiar about it." He made a few steps down the corridor, the girl clinging agreeably to his arm. "Damn!"

"What was it?"

"Nothing. I trod on that confounded loose board."

"Please don't go any further. Don't leave me."

He hesitated . . . then, as he did so, a scream lacerated the night. There was no doubt this time. It was a cry of agony wrung from a human throat. They stared at each other, dismayed.

"That's someone being killed," gasped Peter. "I must go."

He hammered on the door of Achille. "Wake up there!"

But the chauffeur was already aroused. Eager and alert, Achille sprang to the call. And now there was shriek on shriek, cries from overhead, a whirring of alarm bells, pistol shots.

"That's Marteau," said Achille with an upward thrust of his thumb. "He's shooting off an old revolver I gave him. But the screams came from downstairs. Do you care to follow me, M'sieur?"

"Yes, of course. Lead on."

Holding his lamp in one hand and his mauser in the other, Achille went cautiously; peering about him and ready to fire at the least sign. The shrieks had ceased now, but there was a silence even more terrible, a silence pregnant with tragedy. They crossed the hall and into the dining room, Pascaline clinging to Peter.

"Look!" exclaimed Achille, pointing. "The window. It's been broken in."

Through the open window they could see the moonlit terrace and the dark shrubbery beyond. The night air flowed in. Peter peered out.

"I see no one."

"And there's no sign of anyone in the room," said Achille.

"But I'm sure it's from the kitchen the sounds came" cried Pascaline.

"All right. We'll go to the kitchen," said Achille soberly. Again he led the way, down a passage that communicated with the kitchen. Something told them that at the end of that passage they would find what they sought. All three were keyed up, nervously alert. The door at the end of the passage was closed. They paused a moment. From behind that closed door seemed to come a dreadful silence. Slowly Achille pushed it open and they entered.

Nothing, absolutely nothing. Everything in order. No sign of a struggle. From all three came a deep sigh of relief.

"You know," said Peter, "I feel rather foolish."

"But the screams," persisted Pascaline. "I'm sure they meant something."

"Wait a moment," broke in Achille; "We've not finished yet. There's the scullery beyond the kitchen. . . . *Sapristi!* Look! . . ."

At the back of the kitchen was a small door tightly closed, and as the chauffeur pointed they looked down. From below the door trickled a thin dark stream.

"Blood! It's in there."

By the light of the flickering lamp they stared at the horror of the blood. They feared what they might see if they went further.

"Yes, it's there," said Achille hoarsely; "behind that closed door. No use shirking it. Stand back, please. I'm going to open."

With a violent thrust he threw wide the door and then they stood as if petrified. For this is what they saw. . . .

Facing them was a small solid table used for chopping meat. Lurching over it was a man. His arms were outstretched, and through the back of each hand a large steel skewer had been driven. He was spiked down as if he was crucified. A wooden mallet lay on the table.

But this was not all. There was something else, something that wrung from them a cry of horror. The face of the man rested on the table; his head was tilted a little to the right, his mouth gaping, his eyes dilated. And in their wild terror they seemed to be staring at a strange object.

It, too, was spiked to the table, skewered by one swift strong blow. The chauffeur bent down and examined it. He turned to them a shocked face.

"It's an ear," he muttered. "And it's been hacked off him. But . . . it's dark, covered with hair. The fellow, whoever he is, is dead. But, *nom d'un chien!* he died spiked to that board and staring at his own mutilated ear."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DITCH OF DEATH

Spurred by terror, Gros Bébé tore through the tangled underwood with Jojo at his heels. It seemed proper to Jojo that Gros Bébé, who was broad and heavy, should clear the path; but a look over his shoulder forced a cry from him, and with one bound he himself took the lead. However, Gros Bébé spurted, so that the two men arrived at the pigeon-house neck and neck.

Here they halted pantingly, till a crashing of bushes behind them made them rush wildly on again. They descended the rock pathway in record speed, and at the bottom tumbled on their knees on the soft seaweed. Jojo was for making off across the sands; but Gros Bébé ran with the nimbleness of a monkey up the slope of the sea dyke, and after a moment of hesitation Jojo followed him. When they had gone a hundred yards or so they stopped of one accord, broken-winded and exhausted. Gros Bébé was quivering like a jelly and his eyes had the distraught look of a man who has seen an evil spirit.

"Is it coming?" gasped Jojo. "Is it following us?"

As they strained their eyes in the direction of the house, they saw a large dark shadow detach itself from the gloom of the boscage and swiftly dash down the perilous pathway. Impelled anew by terror, they turned and ran. Fortunately the moon lit up the narrow trail, so that they were able to follow it accurately. Unfortunately, on the other hand, their pursuer could see them plainly. Whatever it was, it was running swiftly, bent almost double; and the very vagueness of its shape gave it an added terror. But suddenly it seemed to plunge down into the dark meadows to the right.

"It's gone," said Jojo looking back.

"Gone across the fields to cut us off," breathed Gros Bébé painfully.

Seized afresh by that frenzy of fear, on they pounded again. Soon they came to where the dyke turned sharply to the right, leaving the sands and skirting the wide stretch of leprous marsh. Again Jojo wanted to take to the open. The clean level of the sands appealed to him, but Gros Bébé pointed. Once more the tide was racing riotously in. They could see a long crescent of silver; then a dazzle of dancing surf; then came the great waters rearing and roaring in their eternal conquest.

"Good job we didn't go that way," said Gros Bébé. "We'd have been drowned, sure." Then he stared fearfully down into the dark fields. "Come on! It's somewhere there. It can see us plain up here and we can't see it at all."

The feeling that they were being stalked from the darkness galvanized them to fresh activity, and once more they pelted on. They had only gone about a quarter of a mile when Gros Bébé collapsed.

"I'm all in. I can't go a step further."

But Jojo was staring ahead of them. "Look!" he gasped.

A black shadow blocked the moonlit path. Stationary it stood, as if it waited for their approach.

"I told you it would cut us off," groaned Gros Bébé. "I can't face it. I'm going over there."

He pointed to the sea marsh, that great purple wasteland, laced with glistening channels. Half rolling, half sliding down the steep side of the dyke, he brought up sharply at the edge of the dividing slough. Jojo followed.

"We've got to wade this here ditch. I don't suppose it's very deep."

Nevertheless, as he looked at the silver placidity of the slough, he hesitated. There were tinkling splashes as a number of tiny crabs tumbled off the mud brink into the water. Bubbles of foul gas were ceaselessly eructated. From the gross herbage to the water was a drop of three feet of greasy clay.

"I don't like water," said Jojo, "I can't swim."

"Nor me either. But it can't be deep. Look! *It's coming.*"

The shadow on the top of the dyke was indeed advancing, and they faltered no longer. Frantically they let themselves slither into the water.

"Ugh! It's deep, deeper than I thought," grunted Gros Bébé. It was indeed nearly up to his armpits. Jojo said nothing, for the water was up to his neck and he was grabbing desperately at the greasy bank.

"Come on there," growled Gros Bébé. "Wade across. It's only a few yards."

But, as he tried to do so, he found difficulty in raising his feet. They were embedded in mud. The mud reached to his knees, and still seemed to yield under him. Below the mud was more mud, no end of it. He struggled desperately, trying to wrench out one foot, but only forcing the other further down.

"I can't find the bottom," he groaned. "I'm on mud and I'm still sinking."

In his struggles he beat frantically at the silver water;

then, giving up all hope of reaching the other side, he swung himself round and tried to regain the bank.

"Here, Jojo, give us a hand," he gasped.

But Jojo was having trouble of his own just then. He was clutching at the clay, slipping down, grabbing a fresh handful, sliding again, and all the time making whining noises. It was like a rat being drowned in a cistern, scraping with its paws at the steep side. Gros Béb  gripped him by the shoulder; but that only pulled him down into the water, so that he went under and bobbed up, spluttering furiously. Then, instead of trying to clutch at the clayey bank, he clutched Gros B b .

"Here, stop that!" snarled the big man. "You'll have me under."

He struck at his partner who now seemed crazy with fear. With a tremendous effort Gros B b  managed to reach the bank and, clawing into the clay, tried to raise himself. But Jojo clinging to his back like a monkey pulled him down again. For a moment Gros B b  rested, trying to gather strength for another effort.

Yet, even as he did so, he felt himself sink deeper in that bottomless slime. It was sucking, sucking him down. The mud must be up to his thighs, and there was nothing solid about it. The surface water was up to his shoulders. Then there was the additional weight of Jojo clinging to his back. Each for himself now. He swung with his right fist over his left shoulder and crashed it into the face of his partner; but whimpering like a puppy the little man still hung on. Again and again Gros B b  struck, feeling himself go deeper, cursing and almost blubbering in his terror.

"Get off, you little louse! Save yourself. Let me go."

Then he realized that Jojo had raised himself up on his shoulders and was trying to scramble over his back. Gros B b  was pressed under, and Jojo, clutching the grass roots, was pulling himself to safety. But the fat man, with a

hoarse cry of rage, reached up and pulled him back.

"You would, you rat, you! Save yourself at my expense. . . . I'll fix you."

He had Jojo by the throat, and forcing his head under the water held it there. After splashing for a little, slapping foolishly the silvery surface, Jojo became quite still. Then Gros Béb  pushed the body away from him.

The water was up to his neck now, and his body was embedded to the waist in that viscid slime. His nails scrabbled into the clay, and he hung there helplessly like some great slug; while the moon, shining down on his broad flat face, seemed to laugh at him. Another seemed to be laughing at him too. It was the Shadow that now cowered above him on the top of the dyke. But he was not afraid of that any more.

"Save me," he wailed. "Pull me out. I'll give you a thousand francs."

The wraithlike thing seemed to gibber at him.

"Aid me," he cried again. "I'll make it ten thousand."

But the phantom had vanished. Only was there the dark line of the dyke, the emptiness of the sky, the mocking moon. A last desperate idea came to him. If he could use the body of Jojo as a solid footing—something under him that was not like jelly, something that would resist. He might lever himself up on it. . . .

But alas, Jojo had floated beyond his reach; so, after a few moments of frenzied struggle, his face slipped under the water and some big bubbles rose silverly.

Absolute silence now. A grin seemed to be on the face of the moon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PETER RISES TO THE OCCASION

Curiously enough the first caller in the morning was Doctor Chavas.

"I heard," said he, "of the latest atrocity and hurried to see if I could be of any use to you."

"How the dickens did he hear so soon?" thought Peter. Then, aloud: "Yes, I sent word to the police. Even now they must be on their way."

"Is Mademoiselle well?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. The shock upset her dreadfully. In fact she fainted. It was unfortunate she saw the ghastly sight."

"Dear me! Perhaps I could do something for her."

"Thanks. I don't think so. She doesn't want to see anyone at present."

"I understand. . . . I suppose you know nothing of the man who has been killed?"

"No, a stranger."

"And how did he happen to be in the house?"

"Broke in, presumably. A burglar."

"Ha! And he met the fate intended for one of you."

"Precisely."

"Extraordinary! Do you know that two other dead men have been found?"

"What!"

"Yes. Ragon, the old fisherman, reported it. He was going to visit his fish-lines when he saw them. They were drowned in the tidal ditch that runs below the big dyke. A party of men were pulling them out when I came along."

"Good God!"

"Yes. Must be the same band. However we'll know more about them later on. What I wanted to ask is this: Can I have a look at the dead man?"

"I suppose so. Come on."

Ear of a Dog was still in the same position. Even Doctor Chavas seemed impressed.

"Hum! A new effect in the *macabre*. He's an artist in his line, whoever did this."

"Gruesome, isn't it. What do you suppose happened?"

The eyes of Doctor Chavas sharpened with appreciation. He went forward and, without touching the body, examined it closely.

"*Parbleu!* A pretty crime. And just like the other one."

"What do you think?"

"Why, the man was first stunned with that mallet. You can see the bruise on his skull. Then he was nailed to the table. Whoever did it was evidently fascinated by the ear. You see it's abnormal. So he hacked it off and nailed it there. This poor devil must have come to his senses and started to scream. . . . But there's something else. Look at the neck."

"Horrible!"

"That's what really caused his death. Monsieur, you have travelled a great deal. Have you ever been in Thibet?"

"No, why?"

"It was but a suggestion that came to me. . . . And have you ever heard of a 'raw beef sadist'?"

"Good Heavens, no."

"Well, I have a theory on this whole matter. It was for that I wanted to see the body. My theory is now confirmed."

Through his owl-like spectacles the eyes of Doctor Chavas beamed with satisfaction.

"You mean you have an idea why this thing was done?"

"I think so. It is most intriguing."

"And by whom?"

"That, too, is interesting, but I am saying no more for the present. When I have all the proof I need, I will speak, not before."

"Then, you are interested in the matter?"

"Very much so. As a man of science I am absolutely fascinated by certain aspects of it. Landru, Harmann, and now this. Well, the fat-headed police may yet be glad of my assistance. In the meantime, good-bye, Monsieur."

His departure left Peter more mystified than ever. He had an instinctive dislike of Doctor Chavas. Perhaps, however, that was superficial. The man's appearance was not prepossessing—his long, yellow face with its fringe of side-whiskers. Peter hated hair on the face, even the hogged moustache of the military man. Unclean, he thought, and cleanliness was one of his pet gods. Yes, Chavas might be a clever man, but there was something about him unclean.

"Curious how this last business seems to have braced me," he mused. "The death of James was a knock-out; but this fellow's fate seems to put fresh pep into me. Then Pascaline's down. It's her turn this time. I must be the strong one now. She needs me."

As he went quietly to her room he felt a sense of responsibility quite new to him. He found her in bed, propped up with pillows, her gaze fixed on the window. Her eyes were wide and dark in the pearly pallor of her face. Her profile, clearly defined against the black wardrobe, was delicately sweet.

"Sleeping?"

"No, just thinking."

"Don't think too much. Everything's perfectly all right."

"I'm worried. I can't look after you."

"Oh, I'm topping. Fit as a physical culture professor. And you're all right too, my dear. A bit of a shock, but you'll soon get over it."

"Yes, a shock. Didn't you recognize the man downstairs?"

"No."

"Don't you remember that night at the Rat Rouge?"

"Not very clearly. I was a bit stewed, you know."

"There were three and he was the worst."

"Well, you're not sorry he got his this time?"

"No, I'm glad he's dead."

"And you'll be glad to hear the other two are also disposed of."

"The other two. . . How?"

"I suppose it's them. They found two bodies in that big slough between the dyke and the marsh."

"All three gone," she said in a tone of amazement.

"Yes, you needn't fear them any more."

"I never really feared them. It was Spirelli I feared—I fear still."

"Where do you suppose he is?"

"In prison. His term will not be up till the Spring."

"Don't worry. We'll get rid of Spirelli as we have of the others."

But with a melancholy smile she shook her head. "No, he is not like the others. He will claim me and I must go."

"We'll see about that when the time comes," said Peter grimly.

After lunch he felt strangely stimulated and, in a new spirit of recklessness, ordered the car.

"Damn my heart!" he said. "I've been a slave to it long enough. I'm going to defy it a little. If it fails me, so much the worse."

"Drive to Tremorac," he told Achille. Curious to think it was the first time he had been in the car since the day of their arrival. It exhilarated him. As they bowled over the rough road, the way seemed all too short.

After the usual formalities the body of Ear of a Dog had been removed to the police station at Tremorac and now lay there with his two companions. Inspector Machard of the local *gendarmerie* received Peter with every expression of sympathy.

"We know who they are," he said triumphantly. "We found their car hidden in a grove. And they had papers. You can assure yourself the long distance telephone between here and Paris has not been idle since this morning. A dangerous band. One of the worst. They would have stopped at nothing. Monsieur had indeed a lucky escape."

"But that doesn't solve the real mystery?"

"No," said the Inspector gravely, "it deepens it."

As Peter passed the Post Office the post-master came out hastily.

"I don't know you," he began, "but I recognize the car. Monsieur MacBeth, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Monsieur de Marsac has just telephoned from Paris and has asked about you. He is on the line now. Perhaps you would like to reassure him by answering him yourself."

Peter stepped into the telephone booth, and the post-master closed the door.

"Hello!"

"Allo!"

"This is MacBeth speaking.

"Mon Dieu! *Quelle surprise!* This is de Marsac. How in the world did you get here?"

"In the car. I'm bucking up, you see?"

"Congratulations. How's Mademoiselle?"

"In bed. A nervous shock. Of course you've heard of the latest crime at our place?"

"Alas, yes. I read of it in *Paris-Midi*. That's why I telephoned. I opened the paper expecting to see something about a speech I made at a dinner last night, when, imagine my consternation, staring me in the face in big capitals: ANOTHER CASTEL BLANC TRAGEDY. It's too monstrous."

"Well, we've escaped this time. The fellow took the blow intended for us."

"He was a peculiarly desperate character. Once in my career as a public Prosecutor I ran across him. A good riddance. Still, I hope we'll also get the one who did the deed."

"I don't much care now. As soon as Pascaline is well enough we'll get away."

"Ah! How soon?"

"In a few days, I hope."

"Then, I may see you before you go. I'll be back on Saturday."

"Good. We won't be gone before that. Where are you phoning from?"

"My room in the Crillon. I haven't dressed yet. Have you ever heard of Proust?"

"What is it?—a breakfast food?"

"No, a French novelist. Well, then it's no use proposing you for membership of the Marcel Proust Club?"

"Is a knowledge of him necessary for membership?"

"Not really, but you might be bored. It's because of a dinner at the Proust Club at which I was Chairman I am so late this morning. It was four o' clock in the morning when we broke up."

"Too strenuous for me. I'm a reformed man."

"A wise man, too. Well, we mustn't gossip too long over this line. I have already telephoned to the Examining Magistrate to give you as little trouble as possible."

"Thanks. He's been very nice. Already he's had the beastly body removed."

"Good. Give Mademoiselle my deepest sympathy and hopes for her speedy recovery. Till Saturday then, adieu."

When Peter returned, Pascaline greeted him wonderingly.

"How well you look!"

"I've been joy-riding. And I actually took the wheel coming back."

"I'm so glad. It's my turn now to be sick."

"You'll be all right to-morrow. I'll take you for a drive. We'll go to the old castle of Le Gildo."

"Shall we? Already I feel better."

"That's the system. What have you been doing while I've been away?"

"Thinking."

"Of what?"

"Heaps of things. Do you remember me telling you of the face I thought I saw peering into the window?"

"Yes. I didn't say anything to the Police about that. Perhaps I should."

"No, better not. You see it's all so vague. I couldn't be sure of anything. But . . . I've been wondering who it reminded me of."

"And you can't think?"

"Yes, I can. But it's too utterly absurd."

"Who is it?"

"For the present I'd rather not say. You'll excuse me, please, Uncle Peter. I suppose I'm a little mad, nerves and so on. It's foolish of me to think things like that. Perhaps later I'll tell who the face at the window made me think of. Not now,—it's too fantastic."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ABBÉ GRÉGOIRE MAKES A DISCOVERY

No doubt the Abbé Grégoire was a strange man.

Although he still wore the garb of the clergy, he had long since severed all connection with the Church. Indeed, he was scarcely on speaking terms with the local rector whom he despised as an ignoramus. But the Archevêque of the Diocese, on his annual visit, never failed to call on him; for the Abbé Grégoire had a wide reputation as a scholar and was considered an authority on Breton History.

He lived alone in a solitary house about half a mile outside the sour village of Tremorac. His very low grey cottage had a very high grey wall; so high, indeed, that where it fronted the road it made one think of a battlement. To bear out this, strangers walking along the road would sometimes look up and see the dark, dour face of the Abbé looking down on them.

Very few eyes had seen what lay behind that gaunt grim wall, and many strange stories were current respecting it.

As a matter of fact, the Abbé had a very nice garden in which he took great pleasure. This and his writing occupied most of his time. He had a large library of historical books which he was glad to show the rare visitor, and a small library of a peculiar character which he showed no one.

It was evening. The day had been adorable and the Abbé had climbed to a perch near the top of the wall to watch the sunset. The sun was like a great golden egg in a nest of furious cloud. The cloud was flame colour, then orange, then a tawny pink, then an elusive mauve. The sky above was chrysolite and bars of violet radiated into it like the ribs of a fan. The Abbé Grégoire watched the colours fade, then turned to regard the other side of the horizon.

As the sun was sinking, the moon was rising. In a quiet sky, thrillingly blue, it was just peeping over a ridge. Soon it was like an over-ripe pumpkin; then it turned to a pale melon; then it was a silvery window, latticed by the branch of an elm. The Abbé addressed the moon.

"Ah, my friend, you have a long way to go to-night. You should serve me well."

He descended from his point of observation and crossed to the shed where he kept his garden implements. Selecting a spade and a mattock, he wrapped them carefully in sack-ing and lashed them to the frame of his bicycle. Then, carefully locking his garden door, he sallied forth.

Bone-white lay the road before him, while the fields on either hand were filmy, as if they were covered with fine muslin pinned down by diamond dew-drops. The roofs of Tremorac had a metallic glint but, save for some carousers at the White Goat, the village slept. As he traversed it like a swift shadow, he met no one. Beyond, the country was lonely and silent, with forlorn spaces of wasteland. On some of these, druid stones upstood like ghosts.

The road undulated like a switchback. The Abbé, his long skirts flying, coasted down valleys and panted up hills. Some were so steep he had to walk them. The sweat

streamed down the rugosities of his dark face, and his breath came short.

Once he paused at the top of a long ascent and wiped his dripping forehead with the hairy back of his hand. The night was so still. He had not encountered even a cow. The land lay voluptuously tranquil, as if it acquiesced in the placid caress of the moon. The moon was past the full, and its upper corner was slightly flattened. Nevertheless it was serenely clear. On it four greyish markings seemed to form the grotesque semblance of a face. The pale blue sky was cloudless and sprinkled with ineffectual stars. Between his line of vision and the moon, a pine top was needle-clear and perfectly motionless.

On went the Abbé, a huge black form hunched over his bicycle. He lamented his heavy boots, his clinging skirts. Had he been in a sweater and breeches, it would have been so agreeable; but alas, he was condemned to this hot and hindering costume. Symbolic of the church. It did all it could to discipline a man, to limit his natural freedom. Yet, as he passed a Calvary, automatically he crossed himself.

More moors and pine woods, more dips and rises. At last, thank Heaven! he was nearing his goal. A breathless eagerness began to possess him. He knew this road, oh so well! Many an afternoon had he taken it. At night, however, it was strange to him. On a white stone he read: "Le Gildo, 1 Km." But it was all down hill and he was quickly there.

The half dozen low houses that made up the hamlet of Le Gildo were as still as a dream. He took a path to the right that plunged into a dingle, to rise steeply beyond. Among some bushes he hid his bicycle and, with his two implements, went eagerly on. The path became a trail through bracken and bramble, deep in shadow. Then it mounted abruptly to where some tall acacias threw black darkness below. At last he had reached the ruin of Le Gildo.

In all the land of France no one knew this old castle as he did. He had studied it, dug up mouldering books about it, discovered curious details in its history. His research conducted with enthusiasm had been rewarded beyond his hopes. Now he was able to reconstruct its story as if he had lived in it.

During long summer afternoons he would sit here for hours, dreaming of that past in which he seemed to have played a part. And indeed it was a marvellous place to dream, so cool, so high, so remote. Of the old fortress little remained: some ivy covered battlements and crumbling turrets; the remnants of a watch tower, showing a winding stairway; an abutment of the Eastern wall where the chancel of a chapel must have been; some Gothic archways and narrow doors leading to dungeons long filled in. How often had he crossed that court enclosed by those ruined walls; how often peered through breaches in masonry ten feet thick, plucking out pinches of fine white mortar full of powdered shells, studying some crumbling fortalice that threatened to come down and bury him.

And how often had he lain face down on a grassy mound, gazing through a gap in the walls. From there he could see over a country filled with field and forest with, in the dim distance, the sea. Below, at a dizzy depth, ran a little river through a channel of mud and silt. Beyond was a vast expanse of sand, with fantastic prongs of rock against the blue shimmer of the ocean. Distant woods rolled up to meet the horizon; with farms tucked in between, and village steeples proudly pointing. A wide and gracious vista.

Then, he would think of how in ancient times other watchers had gazed from this very point, perhaps with anxiety and fear. Armoured men had clanked across that court, fair women had looked down from those towers. By night and by day sentinels had paced those battlements. As he looked, he imagined he could see the fires of the invader, armed ships drifting in with the tide, an army with banners straggling

over the sands: sieges, sorties, flying arrows, all in the old unhappy days when life was cheap and living perilous; when people, stunted in body and mind, were like savages, cruel, callous and resigned.

But chiefly did he see the central figure of all this, the great Gilles de Rais. This was his fortress where, by cruelty and fear, he ruled his kingdom. The terror of his fame was far and wide, and his ferocity made a byword of his name. Smaller nobles paid him tribute; pillaged and slew to fill his treasuries; brought him virgins to be deflowered. But worst of all were the orgies, the human sacrifices, the unspeakable rites. History told of six hundred women and children slain to sate his sadistic lust; and the Abbé knew that beneath the ground on which he stood many of these victims had been buried.

He wanted to see for himself, but he dared not dig. For some reason the Government forbade him. "Let the victims of this monster lie in peace," it said,—blind to the value of historical research. How often, gazing at the grass roots, the itch to dig had come over him. Just a little way, but . . . where? The court was so big; there was no indication where he might be successful. His labours might be vain, and there would be the police to reckon with afterwards. It was an action that would only be justified by success. Nevertheless he brooded over the matter, and his desire grew and grew.

Then one night he had a dream. A veiled woman came to him saying: "Dig to the right of the chancel of the old chapel. Dig where the altar stood."

"But I do not know just where," he faltered.

"There is a large flat stone," she answered. "Dig there,"

In the morning vaguely his dream came back to him, troubling him. Then, on the following night, he had the same dream. It was so clear it impressed him. So much so that on that afternoon he had gone to the old castle, and lo! where she had told him he found the flat stone.

That night she came to him for the third time, telling him

to dig. But now it was as if it was a duty she put on him. This time his dream had haunted him, given him no peace. Risk what he might he must discover what lay beneath that flat stone.

And so, here he was to-night with spade and mattock, prepared at last to carry out a cherished design.

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"What about our drive?" asked Peter.

"I don't know," said Pascaline. "I'm afraid I don't really feel equal to it. My head's awful."

"Sorry. I'll go to the village and get you some aspirin."

"That will be beautifully nice of you. It will give you an outing too. How are you to-day?"

"Alarmingly well. You know what I mean—the lull before the storm. I suppose I'll pay for my energy to-morrow, but we can't have two sick people in the house. As long as you're down, I'm bound to be up."

"Then, I'd better keep on being down."

"Don't. You've got to be right soon, so that we can get away from here quickly."

"That's what we're always saying. We're always going to get away from this hateful house, and we're still here. Sometimes I think it's got us. We'll never leave here alive."

"What rot! It's marvellous how I feel optimistic about everything these days. Cheer up, little girl."

But Pascaline refused to be comforted. She was feeling utterly depressed and so tired she did not care much what happened. However, a dose of aspirin banished her headache and some strong tea stimulated her. She decided to get up for dinner, and, although she scarcely tasted of the excellent food prepared by Madame Marteau, she seemed to enjoy watching Peter eat. Indeed she mustered up enough spirit to check him taking a second helping of roast pheasant. They struggled for the possession of his plate, but

finally she secured it and settled the matter by eating the portion herself.

Peter was in amazing form throughout the meal. He talked unceasingly, telling her stories of his adventures, though never was he the hero of them. By turns she was thrilled and roused to laughter. Rarely he talked like this, but probably he was exerting himself to distract her.

"You've made me feel ever so much better," she told him. "I'm regretting I missed my drive to-day."

"To-day's not over. Why not now?"

"At this hour?"

"Ten o'clock. 'A braw bricht moonlicht nicht.' Come, let's. It will kindle your pale and pensive cheek. We'll go for a joy-ride in the moonlight. No end of fun. We'll put the lights out and Achille can drive quietly."

"You tempt me. I'm not a bit sleepy."

"Topping. I'll tell Achille to bring round the car. Now, go and get your things on."

Once comfortably settled she was glad she had come. It was very jolly driving all over the country in the light of the moon. They skirted bays where the sea shimmered with a beauty quite theatrical, and bounded bluffs where the waves boomed sonorously far below. They plunged into the gelid gloom of forests, and came out on dolmen-studded heaths. They swept past calvaries and age-corroded churches, through a savage superstition-ridden land, doubly weird and wild in the light of the moon. For the most part they were silent, yielding to the compelling enchantment of the night; while the powerful car, purring as if pleased, took them up hill and down dale with effortless ease.

It was on their way home that they dipped into a very steep valley. Through a groove in the moon-glazed sands ran a silver ribband of a stream, and perched on the other side of the valley was the ruin of an ancient castle.

"What's that?" asked Peter of the chauffeur.

"Le Gildo, Monsieur."

"By Jove! I've always wanted to see it."

"It's only about three hundred metres back from the village. If Monsieur cares I can stop the car and we can go over there."

"Why not? The view must be stunning to-night."

But Pascaline was not so enthusiastic. "You'll tire yourself," she objected.

"Fiddlesticks! I'm feeling fresh as paint. But perhaps you yourself are too tired?"

"No, I'm all right now. I'll come if you like."

"They stopped the car and Achille, producing an electric torch, led the way. So vague and tortuous was the trail, they never could have found it by themselves, but the chauffeur seemed to know. On account of Pascaline's high heels and Peter's hurried heart they went slowly.

"*Voilà*, Monsieur, we are arrived," said Achille, as they mounted a steep rise and came to a gap between two towering walls.

"*Sapristi!* What's that? There's someone there."

They were looking into a grassy courtyard, flooded with green moonlight. At its far end was a dark shadow. Achille, who was afraid of nothing, advanced very quietly and they followed. About half way across the courtyard they paused.

"It's a man," whispered Achille, "and he's digging."

Again they stepped forward slowly, stealthily, until they were only a few yards away; but still the man did not seem to hear them. He was working furiously, up to his waist in the hole he had made. Still they pressed forward, and at the same moment he fell on his face. He was grovelling in the earth, throwing it aside with his hands, tearing down and scrabbling wildly. Suddenly he gave a hoarse cry, and they saw that he was clutching something. Between his hands it gleamed a dull yellow. With a shout of triumph he raised his head and then he saw them. . . . His shout changed to a

shriek of terror, and he fell back, holding up his arm, as if to ward them off.

"It's the Abbé Grégoire," gasped Pascaline.

"I knew he was a ghoul," growled Peter. "Well, there's no use in scaring the poor man to death. It's us, Monsieur l'Abbé, Monsieur MacBeth and his niece."

The Abbé looked as if he could not believe his eyes. Fearfully he peered at them; then, assured that they were really flesh and blood, he rapidly recovered.

"You shocked me. Can you wonder! Here in this spot, at this hour, and in such a moment."

"What in the world are you doing?"

"Digging. Seeking to uncover the remains of the victims of him who built this castle. And behold! What I have already found."

Peering into the hole, they could make out the shape of a skull."

"Wait a moment," cried the Abbé. "Let me go on."

With his hands he began to scoop out the earth. He worked in a perfect frenzy of haste and eagerness and in a few minutes an entire skeleton was revealed.

"There!" he said, panting in his triumph. "That's only the first. There are hundreds of others, killed by that monster six hundred years ago."

But Achille had been examining the skeleton with his torch and now he spoke.

"This hasn't been dead any six hundred years. Indeed I doubt if it's been dead six. See, the clothes are rotted in the earth. A woman too, by the look of them. *Nom d'un chien!*"

His torch rested on a spot on the ribs just above the heart. Something there emitted a dull gleam. He pulled at it and held it up. It was a pin, long, fine, needle-sharp, but now covered with rust, and it had a head of Chinese jade. Peter stared at the Abbé.

"It looks to me," he commented grimly, "as if there is a

modern Gilles de Bretagne, and he buries his victims in the same spot."

CHAPTER NINE

THE IDENTIFICATION

"Any news?" asked Pascaline the following morning; for, with that new born energy of his, Peter had already been to Tremorac.

"Not a great deal. The ghoulish Abbé went straight to the police and made a clean breast of it. He declared he was directed in a dream to go and dig there. He thought, of course, he was going to discover some relic of the remote past, and his historic zeal carried him away. However, it was a relic of the present, and not very remote at that. The police, inclined to be suspicious of every one, think he knows more of it than he will admit. In any case, he will have a *procès-verbal* for desecrating a historical monument, and probably be fined. That's how the matter stands."

"But the skeleton?"

"It lies at Le Gildo awaiting identification. The clothing is almost rotted away, but enough remains to show that it was a woman. I'm going over there this afternoon, and we'll know more."

The day was adorable, sunny and serene. Except for the orange and crimson of the falling leaves, it might have been June instead of November. Yet, Winter might swoop down without warning. What matter! Were there not, within a day's journey, lands of flowers and eternal sunshine?

Leaving Achille at the house, he drove the car alone.

"Marvellous," he exulted. "Here I am not only running my old bus, but enjoying it more than I ever did. How I always loved to drive! Grudged my man the privilege. The chap got all the fun. A shovver's all right to clean a car and

change a tyre, but let me take the wheel. A fine car's one of the noblest works of man. You can have all the stuff of art—give me modern machinery. There's beauty for you."

He loved the satiny monster that obeyed him so submissively; and on this gracious afternoon a sense of well-being came to him that he had not felt for many a day. No doubt it was the mood of a moment. To-morrow there would be disenchantment again; but he had learned to accept happiness blindly, and exult in it while it lasted.

"The curious thing is," he reflected, "my heart is so alarmingly calm. I used to worry because I could hear it, now I'm worrying because I can't. But it's marvellous how it has improved steadily ever since I came down here. The rest, I suppose, and cutting out alcohol. Funny, I've got no desire to take the stuff now. Perhaps the craving will come back, but I don't think so. Yes, in spite of murder and mystery, my heart has thrived. The White House has paid for itself."

As he swooped down to the village of Le Gildo, the river glittered in a waste of sun-glazed mud. The low grey houses clung to one another as if for comfort, and before one of these a crowd was gathered. The men were dark and gaunt, with short, side-whiskers. The women, grim, hard featured, wore the *coiffe* of their village. They stared gapingly at the glorious car, so that it was evident a Rolls-Royce was not a common sight in those parts. Even Inspector Machard, on guard at the door, was impressed and came forward.

"Any news?"

"Yes, Monsieur, the remains have been identified."

"Indeed. Whose are they?"

"A young girl of Auberon, a good girl till. . . ." he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Till what?"

"Till she went to Paris. Ah! that ogre Paris, it gets all the pretty ones; draws them like a magnet and devours them like a monster. I knew Angèle quite well. She might have

been happy here, but Paris got her. She said she had a place as a chambermaid and left suddenly. She never wrote to anyone, disappeared for a while."

"Went to the bad?"

"We never learned. One morning, about two years after, she got off the train at Tremorac. We scarcely knew her; she was like the pale ghost of herself. She went straight to her father, wouldn't speak to anyone. What passed between them we never heard. That evening she was seen to leave his house and start out in the direction of the station. That was the last that ever was seen or heard of her. And now we find her bare bones among the ruins of Le Gildo castle."

"How do you know they're hers?"

"By a little silver charm we found beside her. It had her name on one side and the Virgin and the infant Jesus on the other. It was given her by one of the Sisters at the Convent School. Poor girl! It didn't shield her from harm that time."

"And what about the father?"

"He could tell nothing. For a long time he stood there, looking. It was painful. Even I was affected. But that man never showed a sign of emotion. His eyes seemed cold and dead. Then he put out his hand as if he were swearing an oath and went quietly away."

"What a terrible experience."

"Yes, I was sorry for him. Nevertheless, there's something behind all that,—something he knows and won't tell."

"And how did the poor girl meet her death?"

"The pin. It was pushed into her heart."

"That should be a clue."

"We hope so. Our investigation is just beginning."

"Ah! You have enough to investigate just now."

"Yes, but we are getting help from Paris. A great detective is on his way. Oh! no doubt we will get to the bottom of everything very soon."

The voice of Inspector Machard was edged with irony. Peter, who knew something of the rivalry between the *Sûreté* and the police, understood it.

"You don't suspect this has any connection with the Castel Blanc affair?"

"Who knows! May be the great detective will tell us."

"And the father of the girl, is he still in Auberon?"

"But yes. Monsieur probably knows him. He is a half crazy old fisherman, by name Ragon."

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Two days later de Marsac returned, and in the afternoon he called. His face was grave, a little pale.

"I'm so sorry to hear Mademoiselle is not so well."

"It's nothing serious," Peter told him. "A touch of *migraine*. She decided to keep her room today.

"But you,—you look ten years younger. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Yes, it's odd how topping I feel. Ever since we found that chap crucified in the kitchen. That bucked me up frightfully. Finger of Fate, don't you know. The blow had fallen and another Johnny got it on the neck. Seemed as if Providence had chipped in, and was going to see us through."

"It's easily explained. Do you know anything of psycho-analysis?"

"No. I hear a lot about complexes and inhibitions and so on. All Greek to me. I'm afraid you'll find me a duffer, but I confess humbly these things are beyond me."

De Marsac smiled. "My dear fellow, you're actually apologizing. Why, you can talk of things far more interesting than I can. You make me ashamed sometimes. You've lived; I only echo life. You can talk of savages and unknown seas, of danger and distant lands. It is I the townsman, the dilettante, who should feel humble before you, the

world traveller. Ah! no, Monsieur, don't worry. You can't talk the effete jargon of the day, but I'd give all my experience for a quarter of yours. You have shot tigers and elephants: behold me potting away at little ducks."

So they talked. Peter found de Marsac more delightful than ever—so warm of sympathy, so keen of understanding. He seemed at home on any subject, and illuminated all. But he kept his own personality entirely in the background. One might talk to him an entire evening, and know no more about him than when one began.

"I suppose you've heard of the discovery of the body in the courtyard of Le Gildo?" asked Peter.

"Rather. I read of it with great interest."

"I don't suppose you ever met the girl?"

"No, but I've heard she was rarely pretty. Of course I spent most of my time in Paris, but I must admit on my few visits here I paid little attention to the local belles. *Noblesse oblige*, you know. We are a very old family, proud of our name. I scarcely dared carry on with any of the country wenches even if I had felt inclined to. No, I know nothing of the girl, but I do know something of her father."

"Ah! What of him?"

"Nothing good, I fear. . . . Well, it will come out anyway, so I might as well tell you. I have known for a long time, though I have said nothing. Old Ragon is an ex-convict. He served a term in the *bagne*. Of course it was long ago, and he was young then."

"What did he do?"

"Killed a man. However, there were extenuating circumstances. The man was rich and seduced his sweetheart while Ragon was away at sea. Curiously enough, the girl really loved Ragon. In fact, she waited for him and, on his release, married him. The murdered girl was their daughter."

"And so she, in her turn, was seduced?"

"That may be. I have never heard. Ragon is a strange

man. His neighbours know little of him. No one knows what passed between him and his daughter in their last interview. At the examination they could get nothing out of him. His lips were sealed, and they had to let him go. But we'll get to the root of the matter yet. Old Ragon pretends to be crazy. I imagine he's craftier than most people think. In any case he's worth watching."

"Can't they trace the pin? It's so unusual."

"No doubt they will. I believe they're sending down a good man from the *Sûreté*. The police here are duffers. Machard rather fancies himself, but he's a . . . well, I mustn't criticize our worthy Inspector. No doubt a new brain will be like a searchlight in the gloom. . . . By the way, when am I to have the pleasure of your promised visit? Can you come with Mademoiselle to my place for tea to-morrow afternoon?"

"Delighted. I can't speak for my niece, but I am sure if she's well enough she'll be equally charmed."

"Thank you infinitely. Understood, then: about four o'clock. And I do hope she can come."

When de Marsac had gone, Peter told Pascaline of the invitation.

"Of course, I'd love it," she said listlessly. "I'll do my best to feel better by to-morrow afternoon."

CHAPTER TEN

THE VISIT

A grass-grown driveway, curving between blue-black pines, opened on a terraced garden. Beyond, lifting above the wall of an old moat, stood a venerable house.

It was lion-hued. At each corner was a sturdy tower, and between the towers castellated walls. The windows were small, and there was no attempt at modernization. The mediæval effect had been preserved. It was a château

in miniature, a little pretentious, but distinctly pleasing.

Eagerly de Marsac came to meet them. He descended the six steps leading from the broad, balustrated terrace to a strip of lawn that confined a fountain. But the cupids no longer spouted, and the basin was littered with dead leaves.

"I am ashamed," said de Marsac with a wide gesture, "The place is going to ruin. But what can I do? It is not the pay of a provincial judge that will keep it up. It is just like a woman. It demands to be supported, and I have not the means. A pity, because, as you see, it has character."

"It is charming," said Pascaline.

"Interesting. Of course, I love it. When I am away, I dream of it, but I come down so seldom. Two old servants of the family look after it. They guard the place almost jealously, so that even in this neighbourhood few have seen it. The plantation shuts it so entirely in. Few would suspect, looking at the dense pine wood, what lies at the heart of it."

"It's a gem," said Peter enthusiastically. "You don't want to sell it, do you?"

But de Marsac looked almost startled at the idea. "No. No money could buy it. As long as I live, it will be mine. And I hope to die in it, as so many of my ancestors have died. But, of course, you understand that. There are many things more precious than money. Only I am sorry I am obliged to neglect the place. My two servants are devoted; but they are aged and there is so much to be done."

He sighed, looking at the window façade with the wistful tenderness of a lover.

"The house is five hundred years old. Of course it has been restored, but never altered. It is the replica of a small baronial château. It even has the ancient dungeons. Once there was a moat, but to my great regret it has gone dry and been filled in at some time."

He led them through some of the principal rooms, pointing

out a detail here and there. All was curiously in keeping. The mediæval effect was sustained, but the result was rather sombre. The windows were narrow and barred; there was much oak panelling black with age, and a great deal of wrought iron-work.

However, the room in which they took tea was more cheerful. A large Gobelin tapestry representing a stag hunt took up one entire wall and, opposite it, was a huge open fire-place with a carved oak mantel and an ingle nook. A jolly fire roared up the chimney. The oak panelling glowed, and on the wall some pieces of steel armour gave back a ruddy gleam.

They had tea from a very modern tea service, brought in by a very old lady whose fine face was like a cameo under her neat white *coiffe*. But she seemed nervous, even a little frightened.

"I expect this is somewhat of an occasion for her," thought Pascaline. "Poor old creature. What a sad face she has."

As if he had read her thought, de Marsac explained: "I never have visitors. Really, you are the first for years. Naturally I'm a lonely man. I have many acquaintances but few friends. Yes, you are the first strangers this old house has seen for years."

"We appreciate the privilege," said Peter. "It's simply stunning."

"No, I'm ashamed of the way it has gone to seed. Perhaps that's the reason I don't ask any one to visit me. You see, it was once so different, so gay. It was full of life and luxury, even in my grandfather's day. That old hall is polished by the satin slippers of charming women, and yon big dining room has rung to the cheer of many a banquet. Often, dreaming here, I seem to see the ghosts of those old revellers. How they laughed and loved and feasted! And now, of them remain not even the name. . . . But I am forgetting my duties. How do you like that tea? I brought it specially from Paris for this occasion."

"Exquisite."

"I had to teach old Margot to make it. It's Russian, but a special brand. Yes, we lost nearly everything by the Revolution. We were a strongly Royalist family. I am Royalist at heart, still; but on account of politics I am obliged to conceal my sympathies. However, I hope before I die to be able to put the place into something like its old dignity and graciousness."

He was conspicuously attentive to Pascaline, whose pale loveliness seemed to be set off by her surroundings. Peter was pleased that he should admire the girl; but when he saw how she responded to the charm of de Marsac, he felt a curious pang. Her eyes, usually so dark and dreamy, were aglow with interest; her sweet lips parted with a faint excitement.

"He attracts her," Peter was thinking. "Some day the inevitable will happen and I will lose her. After all, why not de Marsac? He seems a fine chap. Pascaline will soon have her divorce and a *dot* of several million francs. To a poverty-stricken French aristocrat that is a fortune. I must think the thing over."

Covertly he watched them. De Marsac was tall and distinguished. He combined the assurance of scholarship with the polish of a man of the world. And he had personality. There was something very compelling in his dark, blue eyes, his high aquiline nose, the slightly disdainful droop of his lips. A Roman face, ideal in a Judge; yet still serene with youth.

So, standing by the fire-place, Peter studied them. Pascaline looked very charming. Her slight figure was graceful in its poise, her face flower-like in its delicacy. Her velvety eyes, gazing at de Marsac, were star-like against the pallor of her cheeks. He was showing her an ancient weapon he had taken from the wall. It was a heavy iron mace, studded with knobs, and he was pointing out its craftsmanship.

"Ah! if I only had been ten years younger," thought Peter

enviously. "But then, how could a young and lovely girl ever care for a chap with my lean, ugly mug. Rakeface, they used to call me—a nose too big, a scraggy neck, wrinkles galore. Truly, it would be a misfortune if she ever thought of me other than as a guardian. This big, fine-looking fellow makes an appeal I never could . . ."

A blazing faggot had fallen from the fire. He took it up with the tongs and replaced it. When Pascaline and de Marsac turned again, they found him standing before the fire, the tongs still in his hand, gazing into the glow like a man in a dream.

That night at dinner, he was strangely silent.

"Why are you so thoughtful, Uncle Peter? You look sad too."

"Do I? . . . I don't know. I was thinking . . . lots of things. It was a most interesting place, that old château."

"Yes. Monsieur de Marsac told me that the dungeons under it go very deep. Some day he's promised to show them to us. Wasn't the old servant who brought tea awfully sweet?"

"I thought she looked very much worried."

"No wonder. The first callers for years. Did you see her husband as he opened the gate for us?"

"Sour-faced old devil. No wonder the old lady looks sad with a husband who has a mug like a meat-ax."

"Well, poor things! They live shut in there and never see a soul."

"Humph! How would you like to live there?"

"It's too gloomy. It could be brightened, of course—flowers, more servants, electric light, children. I can see it as quite a friendly habitation."

"I wonder. It looks haunted to me. I must ask de Marsac if there's not a family ghost."

"Curious. I did ask him."

"By Jove! What did he say?"

"He looked startled, then he laughed. He said no, that was one thing the place lacked; but he must invent one, if it would add to the interest."

"Do you like de Marsac?"

"He's charming. So cultivated and respectful. He doesn't look at one the bold way most Frenchmen do, and he never says anything indelicate."

"Yes, he behaves like a gentleman. Well, he's a lucky fellow."

"Why?"

"To be so good-looking, and young and clever."

Again Peter was silent; for so long indeed that she watched him a little anxiously.

"Are you feeling well?" she asked at last.

"As well as could be expected. Ah! this damned old carcass of mine. It's time it was scrapped."

"Nonsense! Please don't talk like that. You're not old."

"Over fifty. And to-night I feel positively ancient, ancient as that crusader's mace de Marsac was showing you. Yes, he's a mighty interesting chap."

Once more he fell silent. She sighed. She did not know what to make of him to-night. He seemed so gloomy, so absorbed. She was almost glad, though a little startled, when there was a ring at the gate bell.

"Who can it be at this hour?" she asked, staring at him.

"Haven't the faintest idea."

She looked out of the window. "Achille's coming with a man across the lawn."

"Someone to see me, I suppose."

"Shall I go upstairs?"

"No. Wait by the fire. I'll see him in the hall. I'll soon get rid of him."

He went out wonderingly. In the shadow of the doorway the man was standing.

"Come in, please," said Peter. "What can I do for you?"

The stranger came forward. His head was bent over his

pocketbook in which he was searching for a card. Then, he found one and presented it. Holding it to the light, Peter screwed his monocle into his eye and read:

PAUL SPIRELLI
Inspector Police Judiciaire
Paris.

END OF BOOK THREE

BOOK FOUR

SPIRELLI

CHAPTER ONE

SPIRELLI EXPLAINS

For a long moment Peter stared at the card. He had received a distinct shock; nevertheless he was thinking rapidly. Slowly he raised his head.

The man was looking at him intently. He stood in an attitude of erect ease, and Peter was conscious of piercing eyes in a pale face.

"You seem surprised, Monsieur."

Peter nodded. So, this was the formidable Spirelli. He was over six feet in height and of a sinewy figure. A slim, grim man, with a mouth thinned to a straight line. But what struck one most was a deep scar that furrowed his right cheek. It ran from temple to chin, just missing the edge of the grim mouth. While it did not completely disfigure him, it was terrible enough. Peter hesitated. Something in the quiet poise of this man impressed him.

Spirelli on his part was watching Peter keenly. He saw a lean, clean Englishman in evening dress, whose blue eyes stared at him in some perplexity.

"I had better explain," went on Spirelli. "I have been sent by the *Sûreté* in Paris to take part in this investigation. Let me show you my credentials."

He presented some papers. To Peter they looked all right. Among them was a letter of introduction from Inspector Machard. Still he hesitated.

"But I can't understand," he faltered. "I thought you were in . . . in confinement."

A faint gleam as of amusement came into the dark eyes that were fixed on his face.

"Ah! You know who I am. Yes, Monsieur, I was in prison up to three months ago. Prison is an education in itself. We all ought to have a course in it."

"The trouble is we have to do something to deserve it."

"That might be well for us too. Experience is experience, good or evil. In prison one has opportunities to think. Ah! the long dark hours! How one reviews the past, adumbrates the future. Withdrawn from the world one sees it in true perspective. Meanings become plain, truths sadly clear. The problem of life is restated in terms of tolerance and pity. Indeed, if a man is not entirely a brute, there is nothing like prison to make a philosopher of him."

"It has changed you, then."

"Behold! Am I not on the side of the law, a hunter instead of one of the hunted? That is good, is it not?"

"It's prudent, anyway."

"True. A man who launches on a career of crime comes to shipwreck in the end. Success only weaves closer the mesh of Fate. Crime is a fool's game, so I abandoned it in time. Call it self-interest if you will; but here I am, a trusted servant of the law."

"It seems incredible."

"By no means. Set a thief to catch a thief. Twenty per cent of the criminal world are in the pay of the police. Without the *indicateur*, we should be almost powerless. Of course, I understand your astonishment. It seems strange to you that I already hold the position I do. But I had unusual qualifications. My science, my knowledge of the criminal world. From the very first I convinced the heads of the Department of my entire sincerity. You read probably of that murderer who was discovered by means of vermin found on his victim,—a rare form of vermin that live only in the dark. The same vermin were found in the cellar of the murderer. It was I who was responsible for the weaving of that chain of evidence. Other cases too. Since the police have

availed themselves of my services, I have been the means of arresting more than one notorious malefactor."

"In short, you have turned traitor."

"Call it rather a change of heart, Monsieur. I have really turned over a new leaf. I am sincere in my desire to protect society instead of preying on it. However, leave my motive aside. Judge me by my achievements. I trust that in this case alone I will convince you of my capacity."

Peter was impressed. The man's papers were unquestionable, and he spoke with a candour that made his statement entirely plausible. If this Spirelli was reformed and penitent so much the better. Then he could no longer be a menace to Pascaline. Indeed, he might be ready to come to some arrangement. There was nothing like handling such an affair coolly and dispassionately.

"Excuse me a moment," he said.

Returning to the dining room, he found Suzanne in the act of clearing the table.

"Where is Mademoiselle?" he inquired.

"Mademoiselle went up to her room."

That was good at least. Pascaline would be better out of the way till he went further into the matter. He told Suzanne to leave the wine and a box of cigars on the table. Then he called to Spirelli.

"Will you come in, please."

The man hesitated, evidently a little puzzled by Peter's manner. However, he entered and accepted an arm-chair by the fire. Peter poured two glasses of port and handed his visitor a cigar.

"Let me take your hat and coat. . . . Good. Now we may continue our conversation. You were saying you do not doubt your ability to solve this mystery."

"No. My criminal career has been the training that will make me a super-detective. Already they recognize that at the *Sureté*. And there is no reason why they should not

trust me. I am really not a bad man. I took up a life of crime because of its colour, its richness in adventure. And I love to pit my brains against that of another."

He gazed over his cigar tip at the glow of the fire. "The old life was interesting," he went on. "Crime is the modern for Romance. I loved the risk, the excitement, the joy of successfully evading my pursuers. But my associates disgusted me. Brutes and blunderers, greedy, lustful, cruel. How I despised them! Really, robbery is no profession for a gentleman. Crime would be adorable if it were not for the criminal."

"Hardly the sentiment of a reformed man."

"Why not? I've simply switched over to the other side."

"The safe side."

"As it happens. I am like a chess player who chooses the white men instead of the black. But I play just as hard and as geniuently to win the game. And I will win. I will rise in my new profession. You will see me one of the heads of the *Sureté* yet. I have ambition, brains, science. Most of my colleagues are duffers. It was my science that made my début so easy, just as it was my science that made me a power in the underworld. They feared and respected me because they knew I could destroy them so easily. And in their hearts they hated me because I could not conceal my contempt for them. I was always the organizer to whom the method was everything, the result nothing. I cared little for the proceeds of my successful robberies, and I have never been guilty of violence. I was the intellectual crook, dominating my associates by sheer force of a superior brain."

"Do you know that three of them are now dead?"

"Have I not been watching them for weeks? I followed them down here. Nay, I even saw the two men drown."

"And you let them?"

"As a matter of fact, they were past hope when I reached them. I don't know, however, if I would have tried very hard to save them. Would you pull a man out of a hole if, the

next moment, he might try to stab you in the back?"

"I might take a chance."

"Not if you knew these men. Besides, I believe in Revenge. It's a fine, healthy sentiment, and ought to be encouraged."

"But why be revenged against your former confederates?"

"Because it was one of them who betrayed me to the police. They made their getaway while I was trapped. They divided the haul between them, laughed at me. Well, he laughs best who laughs last."

"But, by what chance have you been put on this particular job?"

"I asked to be given it. There are features of it that interest me from the scientific side. Then, *she* is here. I want to protect her."

"Pascaline."

"Oh, I've known for long where I could find her. You know, I have a certain claim on her."

"You mean . . . She is your wife."

"Not that. I do not mean to put forward that claim. Perhaps I may never. I have no desire to take her from you. Her welfare is my first wish."

"Ah! Your change of heart?"

"My heart has not changed as far as she is concerned. I love her, but I will never interfere with your mutual happiness."

"Good God, man! you don't think that child is my mistress?"

"Not for a moment. I know her—her purity of character, her fine idealism. And I know men of your kind. You are honourable, chivalrous. My mother, I am proud to say, was English. You shield where others soil. I knew Pascaline was safe in your hands, so I left her alone. No, the claim I referred to was of quite another nature."

He rose and flicked his cigar ash into the fire-place. Then, standing with his back to the fire, he continued:

"I was a friend to her mother. She was a beautiful woman, an Austrian countess. She was older than I, and when I first knew her she was singing in a cabaret in Buda Pest. But she was addicted to drugs, cocaine to be exact. I tried to save her. Alas, it was hopeless. She told me of the child and begged me to seek her out. She wanted her daughter to grow up a good woman; I promised I would help her. That was before the father died. I knew him too, a gifted fellow who sacrificed himself to prove that bibulous Bohemianism is not a thing of the past. Mother—a drug-fiend, Father—a drunkard, Daughter—on the side of the angels. I did what I could to shield her. My one mistake was in forcing her to marry me; but even then my chief aim was, I swear, to protect her. Though we went through the marriage form, she never was my wife. Then, when she discovered my profession, she came to hate me. And the more she hated me, the more I loved her. . . . Well, all that is past."

"Then, why do you come near her now?"

"Still to protect her. You know, Monsieur, a great danger threatens you under this roof. A sinister power is at large. So far it puzzles me; but, believe me, I will solve that puzzle. And I will continue to shield her from harm."

"But if the danger is so great, why should we wait?"

"Monsieur, it is when the trap is baited the rat enters. If you remain even a few days more we may trap the rat. Otherwise, perhaps never."

"Then you want us to remain?"

"A little longer, if you will. It is important. And also I want you to let me sleep here. It was for that permission I came to-night."

"Impossible. Pascaline would never consent."

"Perhaps she would, if you were to explain."

Peter looked at him steadily. Spirelli's dark eyes never wavered.

"All right, I'll ask her. I don't know what to think. I'll leave it to her."

"Thank you," said Spirelli quietly.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THING IN THE ROOM

Thoughtfully Peter mounted the stairs. From Pascale's room came a sound of sobbing, and with a feeling of alarm he knocked and entered.

The girl lay face down on the bed. He could see her shoulders heaving convulsively, and at his touch she turned to him a tragic face.

"*C'est lui.*"

"Yes."

"Don't let him take me. I'd rather die than go with him."

"Hush! He's not come for that. Don't be afraid."

"Hasn't he come to claim me? Oh, I've been so happy with you. Please let me stay with you, Uncle Peter."

"Of course. But he's not going to trouble you. It's something else entirely. Really, he's not so terrible as you think. He has changed."

"You believe that?"

"Yes. He's not the ogre you imagine."

Unconvinced, she shook her head.

"Come now, be brave. In any case I'm here to protect you."

"Yes, I must be brave. I'm like a frightened school-girl. What do you want me to do?"

"Face him."

"I couldn't. Look how I tremble."

"It would be better if you saw him."

"Very well then. I trust in you."

He held her hand as they entered the room. Her head was bent, and he could feel her fingers tighten round his. Spirelli was standing by the fire-place. His mutilated cheek was towards them, but quickly he turned.

His eyes searched her face with an eagerness almost pathetic, as, with hand outstretched, he went to meet her. With an effort she raised her hand. Bending over it he kissed it, but at the touch of his lips she started.

"Forgive me," he said sadly. "Lips like mine are no longer fit to kiss fair ladies. Yet once . . . Ah! the proudest beauty had a smile for me."

He held one hand over his cheek, hiding that hideous fissure that cleft it from temple to chin. Peter noted the significance of the gesture.

"How did it happen?" he asked with sympathy.

"Iron, flame. Leading my men against the Austrians. If it had only been an arm or a leg. . . . Yet, I wonder if I regret. It was my gift to my country. You too gave, Monsieur, did you not?"

"I was willing, but death took the better chaps and passed me by."

"Who can fathom the designs of Fate! Perhaps we were spared for other work."

Peter looked at him keenly. Either the man was a sentimentalist, or an actor. Pascaline seemed unimpressed. With eyes fixed on the floor, she stood there. . . . An awkward moment of silence.

"Let us sit down," said Peter. "We can talk better."

He led Pascaline to her own chair and indicated one for Spirelli. He sat down between them.

"Monsieur Spirelli," he explained, addressing the unresponsive Pascaline, "has gone over to the service of the police. They are to be congratulated. To him has been assigned the task of clearing up the mystery that surrounds us."

"I demanded it," said Spirelli, "on account of its very mystery."

"Monsieur Spirelli," went on Peter, "is only concerned with his duty for the present. He has no intention of pressing any other claim. He wants to do his work and considers it would be better if he slept in the house. I am willing. However, I told him it would be necessary to obtain your consent."

"Do as you please," she said tonelessly.

"Then let us settle it." He struck the bell on the table. It was answered by Madame Marteau.

"Suzanne has gone, Monsieur," she said with a grin that displayed her three remaining teeth. "But if I can be of use——"

"Could you prepare the bed-room next to Achille for this gentleman?"

"*Bien, Monsieur.*"

"Monsieur is a detective sent from the Paris *Sûreté*. He will remain here as long as he pleases. He is to have the run of the house. If you can aid him in any way you might do so."

Madame Marteau allowed her malicious eyes to rest on Spirelli. She saw his face from its wounded side, so that it looked strangely sinister. It seemed as if she shivered slightly.

"*Bien, Monsieur,*" she said in a changed voice, and went hastily away.

"That's that," said Peter. "We'll make you as comfortable as possible."

Spirelli seemed to awake from a reverie. "Thanks, you are too kind. I have a small car and have arranged to take my meals at the village. Who is your cook, by the way?"

"A worthy woman of Tremorac. She worked here for the other tenants."

"Those that were . . . ?"

"Precisely. You might learn something from her."

"I will. And to-morrow I'll become familiar with the house and grounds. I already know the country outside, and most of the people by name—that is to say, those who matter. But it's hard to say who matters."

"If you'll excuse me I'll go to my room," said Pascaline suddenly. She bowed to the men and left them. From first to last she had never raised her eyes to Spirelli. After she had gone, there was a long silence.

"She is lovely, is she not?" said Spirelli at last.

"Yes," said Peter gravely. "I have seen many sweet girls, but she would shine amongst them."

"Her mother was a beauty. Her father a handsome man. It is not strange if she is exquisite. But she has grown in beauty since I saw her last. She is more lovely than all my dreams of her." Then he looked at Peter with a crooked smile: "And to think she is my wife."

"Yes," said Peter dryly; "to think of it!"

"But in name only, thank God. . . ." For a time he was silent, then he said suddenly: "You do not wish to marry her, you?"

"Good Heavens! No. I'm old enough to be her father."

"I believe she would marry you if you asked her."

"What a shame that would be."

"Why? You are kind, chivalrous, a good man. She would be happy with you. She can divorce me and she will be free."

"Impossible. Besides, my days are numbered. Do you still love her?"

"With every heart-beat. I loved her mother too, but not like that. It is as if the love I had for her mother is purified, exalted. The very thought of her lifts me to heights of selfless sacrifice."

Peter stared at the man. Such fervour was truly Italian. No Britisher would have spoken like that. Peter realized the exuberant feeling of the Latin race, its over-expression.

Was Spirelli like that? He did not yet know enough of the man to judge him.

"Well," he said at length, "I expect the house-keeper has your room ready now. Come along and I'll show you upstairs."

.

Pascaline could not sleep. She lay in the dark, her closed eyes making a double darkness.

It was as if she had awakened from a dream, a foolish dream of happiness and freedom. The bond to which she had consented so unwillingly and realized with such a passion of regret seemed again to tighten relentlessly about her. By fear Spirelli had forced her into a marriage and for that alone she hated him. How well she remembered the ceremony in that little church near the Via della Purificazione. From there she went straight to her room and stared with horror at the plain gold ring on her finger. Suddenly it seemed to symbolize a hateful relationship.

With terror she awaited the coming of a husband to claim his rights, but Spirelli never came. For three days she did not see him; then, coldly, he resumed their former relationship. If fierce fire burned in him, he did not show it. She had locked her door against him, needlessly it seemed. She had wanted to throw the hateful ring into the Tiber. She had resolved she would fling herself from the window if he tried to molest her. But he had remained quiet, inscrutable.

And since she had known Peter her aversion to her husband was stronger than ever. But she had hope now. Peter had promised she should go free. Ah! what a day of glory that would be. Just to be free. Never again would she shackle herself. So, afresh she hardened her heart against the man she had married, and with hope throwing open the door of liberty she fell into a troubled sleep. . . .

And again as she slept she had a curious feeling that

something was in the room. It was vague at first, but gradually it grew so strong that with a start she sat bolt upright.

A creepiness was running down her spine, and there was a crinkling at the roots of her hair. Then her heart gave a lift, and clenching her hands tensely, she waited. . . .

The room was in darkness to-night. She could not pierce it. Even the window was indistinguishable. But . . . she could hear something. . . . A soft, dragging sound it seemed, and it came from between the window and the wardrobe. . . . Then, silence again. Ah! in that silence, how she could hear the thumping of her heart. . . . Then again that slow dragging movement. What did it make her think of? It was like a beast emerging from a lair. Suddenly she saw. . . .

From the heart of the darkness two eyes were staring at her. Very large eyes they were, with a cold grey iris and yellow eyeball. And they glowed in the dark. Light seemed to emanate from them, to pierce the darkness in two parallel rays. And the eyes were fixed on her unflinchingly. Their fierce flame stabbed the gloom, piercing her with a baneful menace. A sense of terrible danger overswept her. . . .

Now the eyes were drawing nearer to her, still nearer. Fear petrified her. Was she having a terrible dream? Oh, that she might wake up! . . . As in a real nightmare she aroused herself by screaming, so now instinctively she screamed. And with her scream she seemed to throw off that sense of impotence. With a single movement she flung herself out of bed and was at the door of Peter's room.

Now she was wrenching at the handle, beating, screaming. It was as the time before, only now the door would not open. Then she remembered. For some reason she had locked it between them. She could hear Peter shaking at it from the other side. Frantically she twisted the key, and with a rush

the door flew open. As she fell forward Peter caught her. She was sobbing wildly.

"What in God's name is it?"

For answer she hid her face on his chest and threw her right arm behind her, her open palm towards the darkness.

"There! There!" she panted. "The eyes."

But he could see nothing. Yet it seemed as if he heard the door lock click. Supporting her, he backed into his own room and gripped the pistol that always lay on his *table de nuit*. For a moment he stood irresolute. She was like a leaden weight in his arms, paralysing his movements. Staring into that baffling darkness, he was all aquiver to leap forward, to tear aside its mystery.

Then, as he hesitated, he heard a sound in the corridor, shouts, a succession of shots. That roused him to action.

"Come, brace up. We've got to see what's wrong."

He flung open his own door, to be confronted by Achille, mauser in hand.

"I saw it, Monsieur," cried the chauffeur. "It was at the end of the corridor. It vanished down the servants' stairs. It was dark and hairy, like a wolf. I fired three shots, but I was then too late."

"But Spirelli, where is he?" demanded Peter.

Achille sprang to the door of Spirelli's room and threw it open.

"Monsieur, it's empty."

"Empty?"

"Yes. See, the bed is untouched."

Peter was amazed. Where could Spirelli be at such a moment?

"The Thing has escaped us again," he cried angrily. "Damn the man! He might have helped us. Where is he?"

But at that moment they heard steps springing up the grand staircase, and a voice crying:

"Don't shoot there. It's I, Spirelli."

Then they saw the detective coming swiftly towards them. He was out of breath and there was a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"What is it?" he demanded. "I heard shots."

"Yes, you missed a glorious chance to capture it. The Beast, the evil Thing. It's been here again."

"Where is it now?"

"The devil knows. It got away by the servants' staircase."

Spirelli uttered an exclamation of chagrin. "What cursed luck! I'm not beginning very brilliantly. You'll be wishing I were Inspector Machard."

"But where were you?"

"I'll explain. Instead of sleeping I thought I would watch the grounds at the back of the house. I have the eyes of an Indian in the darkness. I can see things where others are blind."

"Yes. And what?"

"I opened the shutters of my window a little way and was sitting quietly when I thought I saw something move in the shrubbery. I made sure. There *was* something. It only stirred from time to time, as if to change its position a little. It seemed to be watching the house. So I marked the place carefully, and slipping downstairs I let myself out by the front door."

"And then?"

"It must have seen me coming round the end of the house, for it was no longer there. All at once I heard it moving in the bushes. Quick! I was off in pursuit. But it was faster than I. It seemed to zig-zag through the underwood like an animal. All I could do was to follow by the sound. Suddenly I arrived at the edge of the cliff overlooking the sands. Just there the root of a tree grows some ten feet down the rock, and from that there is a drop of another ten feet to the beach. It must have escaped that way."

"But were there no marks on the sand?"

"No. A heap of seaweed lay underneath."

"Then, how do you know anyone escaped by there?"

"Because in examining the tree root with my torch I found caught in the cleft of a little snag—this."

Spirelli held in his fingers an inch of freshly torn, grey-green yarn.

CHAPTER THREE

DE MARSAC DOUBTS

Next morning Spirelli was up and about before anyone else was stirring. He spent the whole forenoon examining the grounds and the lower part of the White House. It was after lunch, before Peter saw him.

"Well, how are you after all the excitement?" asked Spirelli, dropping wearily into a chair.

"Right as rain. Got some sleep towards morning."

"And how is she?"

"Not so well. Very nervous. Says she'll keep her room all day. She wants me to get her some sleeping powders. What have you been doing?"

"I've had a busy morning."

"Any success?"

"Nothing definite. Still, I've mastered the *mise en scène* and formed some conclusions. Everything helps. I have gone over the grounds. Very interesting that."

"Interesting, eh?"

"Not particularly so in front; though a few nights ago someone was concealed in the shrubbery beside the terrace. The finer twigs were broken, and I found a heavy footmark on the soft leaves. More conclusive, I found a twisted cigarette paper and some sodden shreds of caporal. As I remembered that an ancient and unlamented colleague of mine smoked that particular brand of cigarette paper, I formed a

conclusion. However, that has no precise bearing on the matter in hand. More to the point, I found traces of someone freely and frequently moving about in the dense shrubbery behind the house. In places there are regular tunnels which could only have been made by a man or a large animal."

"By Jove!"

"Yes. This runway comes out at that point on the cliffs where my man escaped last night. I examined the place this morning. It would be easy for any one to slide down the tree root and drop on to the shingle. It is evident that someone has been in the habit of climbing up from that direction and crawling close to the house. Concealed in the cover of the brush he could do so in perfectly security. Escape would be so easy. This afternoon I will examine the sands. Unfortunately the tide had effaced possible footprints."

"You might show me this tunnel under the brush."

"I will. I don't want to disturb it, though; so that whoever has come will come again."

"You think the person you saw last night came that way?"

"Yes, but probably was surprised a little distance from the entrance, and was obliged to break through the undergrowth. Otherwise, he could have vanished like a rabbit in the whins."

"And you think that what you saw was different from what entered the house?"

"Obviously. For, while I was pursuing what was in the garden, you were engaged with the other."

"Then there are two?"

"It would seem so."

"But how did our one escape?"

"Unfortunately I left the front door open. He might have got away by that means."

"There was no time. You would have met him."

"True. When I heard the shots I ran back. Then I would probably have encountered the thing; that is, unless it

escaped by going round the other side of the house. In that case I might have missed it by a few seconds."

Somehow Peter felt there was something very unsatisfactory about all this.

"It's unfortunate you were too late," he said. "By the way, did you close the front door when you went out?"

"I did, on the latch, of course; so that I could open it when I returned."

"And was it closed in the same fashion when you came back?"

"It was."

"Do you think anyone flying in haste would be likely to close it so carefully? Wouldn't they be more likely to leave it open?"

"They might,—and they mightn't."

"But all that doesn't explain how the thing *entered* the house and concealed itself in Pascaline's room."

"That's true," said Spirelli, biting on his nails.

"There must be some way of getting into this house," Peter persisted, "that we know not of; and neither by door nor window. Someone is able to come and go as he pleases and has us absolutely at his mercy."

"I am inclined to agree with you," said Spirelli with a wry grimace. "But I must confess I am entirely at a loss and it exasperates me. Have you ever examined the basement of this house?"

"Never."

"I don't blame you. It's very dark and dirty down there. It runs the whole length of the building, a series of cellars divided by a central passage and floored with cement. There is a large wine cellar full of casks and bottles. I moved them, but could find no trace of an outlet. It was a mean job, working by lamplight amongst the cobwebs and foul air."

"I can imagine that."

"Then, there's a fuel room, containing four large bins and communicating directly with the kitchen. One bin had evidently been used for coal, another for charcoal, the other two for faggots and kindling. They're made solidly of wood and take up one entire wall. I lifted the heavy lids but found them all empty. I even examined the interior of each, thinking there might be false boarding. I could see nothing."

He passed his hand over his eyes with a gesture of weariness. For a little while he was silent, then he continued:

"I asked your worthy housekeeper about these bins, but she told me she had never used them. It was, she said, too hard for her to carry fuel up those narrow stairs. She preferred to order what supply she needed in small quantities, and store it in the kitchen."

"I don't blame her."

"No. The stairs are rather difficult, and the cellar infernally dismal. Well, I examined all of the six cellars. Two of the smaller ones are full of old rubbish, broken furniture, bits of Breton beds, etc. It might be worth your while to have a look at that stuff. There's some carving that might interest you. However, I patiently shifted all the old junk and examined walls and floor. I could find no means of egress. Of course the light was poor, and with my eagle eyes stinging with dust, probably my vision was not so penetrating as it might have been. Have others been through these cellars?"

"Yes, the police."

"And they found . . . ?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I'm not entirely satisfied. I'd like to have someone to aid me in making a more careful search. But there! You see I have not wasted my morning."

"Indeed no."

"Much labour for little reward. And here I am telling you all about your own house. Funny, isn't it?"

"For me, no. You see, the place was a thief's bargain and,

at the moment, all I wanted was a hole to crawl into and die in. Beyond that I took no interest in it. I take more now than I ever did. It's because I'm feeling better, I suppose."

"You don't want to die now?"

"Not just yet. I'd like to see this puzzle solved first."

"And after?"

"There may be others."

"Keep it up. By the way, I had a talk with that housekeeper of yours."

"And what?"

"I questioned her about the two first victims. She was conspicuously reticent."

"She struck me as that way too."

"That old lady is concealing something. I don't say she has any direct connection with what has happened, but her conscience is troubling her. She almost turned green when I entered. Seemed afraid of me. Of course, I can understand that. When I want to impress people I turn to them the mutilated side of my face. It's not pretty, and it makes a grim impression."

"Your wound . . . You know I never noticed it after the first day."

"That's nice of you. Still, it affects others, and I must admit that sometimes it's an asset in my business."

However, he gave Peter the intact side of his face as he went on: "Yes, the old lady is not telling all she knows. And for the matter of that," he added smilingly, "she's not the only one who is concealing something?"

"No, who?"

Spirelli looked at Peter quizzically. "You."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that you have a suspicion, perhaps a clue."

Peter laughed uneasily. "My suspicion may be a very false and foolish one."

"My dear fellow, by all means keep it to yourself. I have a horror of being led off on a false trail. I prefer to work

without aid. Slow and sure, I hope. But is it not so? You do not want to tell me something?"

"It's too fantastic."

"Perhaps. It might disconcert me. But it's not that entirely, Monseieur. It's because . . . you don't exactly trust me."

Peter protested energetically.

"Oh, I know," went on Spirelli a little sadly. "It's hard to live down one's past, even when one has paid the penalty. No one trusts me except perhaps my chief in Paris. My colleagues at the *Sûreté*, the Inspector of Police in Tremorac, you,—you all look at me doubtfully. I can hardly blame you. I have yet to prove that I am not playing a double game. But give me a chance. By the way, have you met our worthy Inspector Machard?"

"Yes. A stout, slow man, with bulgy eyes, rosy jowls and a prodigious moustache."

"That's him. He's particularly antagonistic towards me. I believe he does me the honour to be jealous of me. Probably he has ambition to follow in the footsteps of our Lecoq or your Sherlock. An honest man and a good officer, but vain, mulish, unimaginative. Well, I shall do nothing to obstruct him, and wish him success."

"But you will do nothing to aid him?"

"No. I want all the glory or none. . . . Ah! someone is ringing the front bell."

"All right, I'll answer it," said Peter. He was not surprised to find that it was de Marsac. The Frenchman wore a shooting costume that showed off his fine figure. A shot gun lay in the hollow of his arm and a game bag hung from his broad shoulders. Two liver and white spaniels ran in, but de Marsac called them to heel. His cheeks were aglow and he flashed his charming smile.

"Hullo, old man. So glad to see you," said Peter. "Had any luck?"

"Half a dozen snipe. They're wild and wary yet. How's Mademoiselle?"

"None too well. We got another scare last night."

De Marsac's manner changed. He stared at Peter: "Mon Dieu!"

"Yes, the house was entered again. The Thing was once more concealed in her room, and after frightening her almost into a fit it vanished absolutely."

De Marsac leaned his gun against the wall. A deep frown knitted his brows, and his blue eyes seemed to flash fire. Peter, bending down to caress the dogs, was surprised at the change in him. His lips were compressed with a look of relentless force, and his large hands clenched till the knuckles showed white. There was something formidable about him at that moment. He seemed to grow taller, till he made Peter think of an outraged demi-god ready to smite and slay.

"But it's incredible. Ah! my poor friend. And Mademoiselle? Is she unharmed?"

"Luckily yes. But badly upset."

"It's monstrous. By God, MacBeth, we must get that devil by the tail, and quickly. I learn they have sent down a man from Paris."

"He's here now. Come and meet him."

At first sight of Spirelli, de Marsac started. But that was probably the effect of the scar. Peter introduced the two men. De Marsac bowed without giving his hand.

"It seems to me I remember your name, Monsieur," he said courteously.

"Yes, we met once," answered Spirelli with a smile. "I was witness in a case you were defending. I helped to get your client off."

"That must have been years ago, when I was practising in Paris. I have a good memory for faces, but I do not seem to recall yours."

"It was before the War. My face was not as you see it now."

"I understand."

"Then, Monsieur, you may remember the jewel robbery in the Place Vendôme."

"But you are not the . . . the famous Spirelli?"

"Infamous, you would have said. The same. Once an enemy of society, now its protector."

"Indeed," said de Marsac with an accent of irony. "The law is lucky to have secured so distinguished a recruit. In our fight with the growing army of crime we need all the men of intellect and ability we can enlist, and some of our brightest have graduated from the underworld. I wish you every success, Monsieur Spirelli."

"Thank you, *Monsieur le Juge*, I will do my best. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I am going to walk over the sands in the direction of Auberon."

De Marsac watched the dark figure of Spirelli disappear amid the pines to the left of the White House. He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"A queer business. I must telephone to the Chief of the Sureté in Paris, and find out if they really sent this man down. . . . Do you know who he is?"

"Yes, he told me."

"Better to be frank about it. Perhaps it's good, though. Set a rogue to catch a rogue. But it might be well to be careful. He's clever, that chap. I wouldn't trust him too far."

"I don't mean to," said Peter.

After further expressions of sympathy for Pascaline, de Marsac took his leave. Peter saw him go with regret. He felt anew the compelling charm of this man. Left alone he was bored and inclined to be melancholy.

It was drawing to dusk when Spirelli returned. He came by the path from the pigeon-house and Peter met him.

"You must be tired. Come and have a drink."

"Thanks, I will."

Peter poured a whisky and soda.

"You're not having one," commented Spirelli.

"No, excuse me. I never drink these days. Heart."

"Quite right. Well, here's to your better health."

"Any news from Auberon?"

"There is, rather. Not quite in our line, though. It's about that body they found in the yard of Le Gildo castle."

"Yes. What of it?"

"You remember the long pin with the jade head that was forced between the ribs,—well, they've traced it."

"To whom?"

"To a Chinaman, the servant of a retired surgeon called Chavas."

"Great Scott! Have they arrested him?"

"Hardly. But they tried to question him. He couldn't tell anything. He's dumb, you see. He could only write, and as that's in Chinese they are not much the wiser. You don't by any chance understand Chinese?"

"Not at all."

"If you did, you might go over and help our friend Inspector Machard. He gets the credit, I believe, of discovering the owner of the pin. Great feather in his cap. Only he hasn't got the faintest smattering of Chinese. No one has. They stare at what the yellow man writes and look foolish."

"And do you know Chinese?"

"I have, as it happens, a slight knowledge of that difficult language. I am not out, however, to help Inspector Machard."

"But Doctor Chavas? He lived in China for years. He must understand."

"No doubt he does," said the detective dryly. "Unfortunately he isn't there. Three days ago Doctor Chavas completely disappeared."

CHAPTER FOUR

SPIRELLI IS DISPIRITED

Eight o'clock. Peter stared out at the sullen scene. A fine drizzling rain was falling, pearlying the laurels and misting the lawn. Over the tree tops the grey sky glowered sullenly. December, winter, the wet, wild winter of Brittany. Already the young day seemed disgusted with its fate.

As if to flout its dreariness, Peter wore a dressing-gown of apricot colour and smoked a cigarette in an amber holder nearly a foot long. Two of his weaknesses were flamboyant dressing-gowns and super cigarette-holders. His grey head was brushed so that every hair was in place, and his lean face was shaved with military scrupulosity. As he stared out of the window he held his thin hard figure very erect, and did not look at all dismayed by the dismal promise of the day. There was indeed a twinkle in his eyes, a whimsical twist of his mouth. In spite of the weariness of the weather, it was plain that he was for some reason reasonably happy.

"Footsteps," he murmured, "footsteps stamped on the beaded grass of the lawn. The sleuth Spirelli is already at work. I wonder if he's really as wonderful as he imagines he is. Well, he isn't the only one. I, too, begin to fancy myself as a detective. And sometimes the amateur succeeds where the professional fails. The redoubtable Spirelli may yet take off his hat to my simple self."

With this pleasing reflection, he knocked softly on the door that communicated between his room and Pascaline's.

"All right," answered a yawny voice. "I'll open. Just give me time to get back into bed after."

"Why does she lock the door between us these days?" wondered Peter. "Is it a sharpened sexual consciousness, or a newly awakened sense of convention?"

Prudently he opened the door. Pascaline was crouched

comfortably in bed; her glossy hair hung in two black braids and between them her face looked luminous. Her dark eyes were bright as a bird's.

"Feeling better this morning?"

"Yes, Uncle Peter, thank you. And you?"

"Slept wonderfully. It's so comforting to know there are six people in the house, all more or less on the alert. In the face of such vigilance our nocturnal visitor must hesitate. You heard nothing?"

"No, but I slept—oh! *slept*. I feel brave again. Presently I'm going to get up."

"Pooh! I've been up an hour. Spirelli was up at six. A reservoir of energy, that chap. He's off, I suppose, putting some theory to the test, pursuing some possible clue, analysing, synthetizing, eliminating and all the other stunts those detectives do. By the way, I wish you would not be afraid of him. I find him most interesting."

"Do you believe in the sincerity of the change in him?"

"Why not? He sees the futility of crime, and its romance no longer fascinates him. Why shouldn't he chuck it and go in on the winning side? Dead wise, I think. But, after all, I'd like to believe it wasn't only prudence that made him change over. You yourself admitted he had a streak of goodness that didn't fit in with the rest."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"You said he was ugly," went on Peter, "I don't think so. If one can judge the uninjured side of his face he must have been fine looking. As for the other, I scarcely notice it now. And if one considers how he got that scar one should think it the handsomer of the two. Poor beggar! How he must have suffered! He told me they tried grafting on animal flesh, but it didn't work. And no one was more interested in the operation than Spirelli himself. But what does the face matter if the heart's all right?"

"Is his?"

"He says it is. As a proof, he's prepared to do the fine

thing as far as you are concerned. After this business is over, he is ready to go out of your life never to return. He seems bitterly sorry he forced you into an unwilling marriage, but he pleads the expediency of it. I can see his point. If I were in your place I would trust him, or at least try to behave decently to him."

"All right. I'll be nice to him. I'll try to like him."

"That's sporty of you. You know, my dear, you're sometimes a worry to me."

"Why?"

"Your future. You won't have me always."

"Oh, please don't begin about your heart, Uncle Peter. You know it's getting better every day. Surely you don't still think all that stuff about being doomed and so on?"

"Indeed I do. The year the doctor gave me won't be up until March. I hate to think of what might happen to you when I'm gone."

"What must I do?"

"Marry again. Someone you love this time."

"For instance?"

"Some nice young Englishman. An army or navy man, by preference. I have a nephew who might do."

Pascaline was sitting propped up by pillows. Her eyes, clear and bright, regarded him.

"Why won't *you* marry me, Uncle Peter?"

He looked at her with amazement. "Young woman, are you not ashamed to make such an audacious proposal?"

"Not at all. Why won't you? I'm young, I'm nice. I'd make you a good wife."

"Good gracious, my dear! You don't know what you're saying."

"We'd have a house in the country. I'd present you with a fresh baby every two years. I love babies. I'd look after you and we'd grow old comfortably."

"Yes, and when I was a senile greybeard, you'd be in your prime. Remember there are thirty years between us."

"I could happily forget them."

"But . . . there must be love in marriage. You don't love me."

"Oh yes, I do."

"How can you say it in that matter of fact way?"

"Because it's a matter of fact."

He looked at her with humorous irritation. "Really, my dear, we can't approach a sacred subject in this cold-blooded fashion. I'm awfully fond of you, but there . . . You must remember too I'm scheduled to depart from this sublunary sphere by the end of March."

"Oh, please don't be always talking of your approaching departure. You'll be coming to believe in it yourself."

"Of course I do. . . . Then imagine yourself left a rich young widow, a prey to the first adventurer that came along."

"You haven't a high idea of my sagacity. However, I can understand you would prefer to see me safely married. Well, I'll do anything you want, Uncle Peter. I'll marry the man you choose, whether I like him or not. What is your nephew called?"

"Haven't the faintest idea. Never saw him in my life. He exists, that's all I know."

"You're hopeless. Absolutely unpractical. Can't you think of someone you do know who might suffice?"

"I should prefer a man of my own race. They're more reliable. But, . . . de Marsac doesn't seem a bad sort."

She looked her amazement. "Monsieur de Marsac would never marry *me*."

"Why not?"

"He is a man of family, of position."

"And what would you be, pray? My legally adopted daughter, with a *dot* running into millions. Monsieur de Marsac might be glad of the chance. Besides, have you not family? A father descended from the kings of Ireland, and a mother a Bohemian, or is it a Hungarian countess. That

reminds me, I must ask Spirelli for further particulars of your mother's people. And now I've given you something to think about, I'll leave you to dress."

He went away, but she continued to sit there, her eyes fixed in thought.

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It was at lunch that she broke to him the tragic news.

"Cook's leaving us. She says she won't stay in the house another day."

"By the law she must give ten days' notice, or she'll forfeit her wages."

"I told her so. But she told me I could keep the money. She was going."

"What's the matter?"

"She says she won't have 'that detective poking his nose into everything and asking her questions as if she was a criminal.' She says: 'The man gives me the creeps with his scarred face.'"

"Poor Spirelli! Well, we can't do without her at this moment. Give her some unheard of price to stay out the month. How much is she getting?"

"Two hundred."

"Offer her a thousand."

"Don't be foolish."

"Bah! What's that to me? Go now and fix it."

When she returned, her face was brighter. "I've arranged it. She'll stay for nine hundred, but it's a shame."

"Never mind. See . . . There's a boy coming across the lawn carrying a basket. I wonder what it is."

It proved to be piled with hothouse grapes ranging in colour from pearly white to purplish black. They were misty with bloom, like waxen imitations in their perfection.

"Aren't they lovely," she cried. "It would be a shame to eat them."

"They're addressed to you," said Peter. Curious how he felt a pang.

"To me. . . . Who would send me these?"

"There's a card."

As she read, a flush mantled her face. "Hector de Marsac, with compliments." She bent her head, not a little confused.

"Fancy sending these to me. How can I thank him?"

"You'll have a chance this afternoon. He's coming to tea," said Peter dryly.

They had tea in the dining room in front of a gorgeous fire. Outside there was no check in the rain. De Marsac, who arrived about four, excused himself for his wetness. His cape glistened, and his cap was pearled. But his cheeks had a clear colour and his blue eyes sparkled. A rejoicing creature, full of strength and cheer, he seemed to bring with him a breath of green pastures, and the tang of the sea. They felt that a personality had come into the room, someone powerful and dominating.

"Ah! my friends," he cried. "You passed a good night? I was so afraid for you. But you heard nothing? How glad I am."

He took the conversation into his own hands. To Pascaline he talked of books, of the younger school of French writers, many of whom he knew. He described Morand, Cocteau, Girardoux, Dorgelès and other ardent spirits who are making the literature of to-morrow. But, seeing Peter was hopelessly out of it, he switched to sport, drawing him out on polo in India and tarpon fishing off Florida. Then he went on to speak of the French theatre. He took up a play of Bataille that the girl was reading, and with expressive voice and gesture imitated the style of this and that actor. They listened entranced, for here was a man of keen dramatic instinct, of wit and imagination. He had a sophisticated knowledge of society, and that sparkling super-

ficiality that is the charm of conversation. When he rose to go, Peter admitted to himself that the visit was all too short, while Pascaline almost uttered a sigh of regret. As de Marsac was leaving she shyly thanked him for the grapes.

"The pleasure is mine," he smiled. "I am so glad to find someone who will appreciate them. I grow them myself. Perhaps you didn't notice the vinery to the left of the house, one of the few remnants of our former prosperity. Old Simeon does the rough work, but I come down specially to prune them. Though the vines are rather old now, they used to be quite famous. You must come and see them some afternoon. I should be enchanted."

A vibration in his voice made her look up; but at the glow she saw in his eyes she looked down again.

"Thank you so much. I'd like to."

"Splendid. We'll arrange an afternoon."

"Isn't he frightfully interesting," she said when de Marsac had gone; but her enthusiasm only roused a growl from Peter. She went on: "You know he's so sympathetic I can't imagine him as a Judge. I can't think of him as stern and pitiless, sentencing a man."

"I can. And you could if you'd seen him when he told me of the satisfaction it would give him to sentence the man who had committed these crimes, and send him to the guillotine. Well, I hope he will."

Pascaline shuddered. As she looked into the dripping twilight, all the cheer seemed to go out of her. "I wish you hadn't reminded me of that."

"Oh, come. You're not losing your nerve again."

She went close to him, looking up into his face.

"Peter dear, let's go away from here. Let's take the car and go now."

"That would be sheer funk."

"Then to-morrow."

"No, I want to stick it. I believe we're on the verge of discovering the secret. You go."

She stamped her foot. "I'll never go without you," she said passionately. Then she added: "I wish you'd change your mind, though."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've a presentiment."

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Peter was dressing for dinner when Spirelli returned. As he manipulated his tie he heard the detective enter the hall. He called to Pascaline.

"The poor chap must be wet and tired. I must see him before he goes to Tremorac for supper."

She came to his door. "What a shame he has to go there on such a night! Why couldn't he dine with us?"

"I'd like to ask him. Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Really I don't mind."

But to his surprise Spirelli refused.

"It's quite all right," said Peter awkwardly. "Pascaline asked me to ask you."

A gleam came into the man's deepset eyes. "I thank her infinitely, but I cannot. I'm taking the night train for Paris."

Peter was a little startled. "Then you're leaving us without your protection?"

"I expect you'll manage."

"That remains to be seen. But when will you be back?"

"To-morrow I hope."

"Any news?"

"I got a message from my chief in Paris. Monsieur de Marsac telephoned about me. Somehow he seems to mistrust me. I suppose he doesn't know anything about . . . about my relationship to Pascaline?"

Good Heavens, no."

"Men in his position get to know a good deal. Well, I'm glad he has no suspicion there. But he really tried to get me withdrawn from this case. However, I can understand. Our friend Machard is a protégé of his, and he wants the

inspector to handle the whole situation. There's a certain amount of jealousy between the *Sûreté* and the Police, so for the moment my chief refused to recall me. But I don't feel safe. Monsieur de Marsac has great influence and may have me put off the job at any moment."

"I can't understand that. De Marsac's a splendid fellow."

"I have nothing against him, but . . . he mistrusts me."

"Perhaps if you convinced him that you had made some important discovery. . . . Have you, by the way?"

"I don't know if you'd call it important. It may be only a coincidence."

He took from his pocketbook the broken bit of yarn he had picked up in the garden.

"I showed you that, I think. Evidently a strand of wool torn from a sweater. Well, I've found someone who wears sweaters of that peculiar colour and quality of yarn."

"Who?"

"You'll not say a word, of course. . . . The Abbé Grégoire."

CHAPTER FIVE

A DISCOVERY

That evening Pascaline was very quiet; listening to Peter's conversation abstractedly, if she listened at all. He noticed it and wondered.

After dinner they drew their chairs up to the cheery fire, where he smoked a number of cigarettes while she bent over a piece of embroidery. He watched her, admiring the jetty richness of her coiled hair, the oval of her face with its luminous pallour. Her mouth had the expression of child-like sweetness he loved. He could not see the velvety dark

of her eyes; but he appreciated the effect of the long lashes against the pure clarity of her cheeks, and the fineness of her well-marked eyebrows.

A creature of delicate loveliness. It was not strange that he was fond of her. The thought that some day she would belong to someone else rather hurt him to-night. Another man would be the object of her love and care. A young, selfish man, for young men were generally selfish. It took an older one to appreciate the exquisite nature of a young girl. Ah! if his own daughter were alive she would be about the same age as Pascaline, perhaps have something of the same look. . . . Well, it was the ancient way. She would go and, in part, forget him. And after all, what did it matter? His own race was run, his rôle played. . . . And so nursing such thoughts, he smoked before the fire. Never, it seemed, had she been so much to him as to-night when she seemed to be slipping away.

"What are you thinking of?" he said, breaking a long silence.

She started; then, without looking up: "Of Monsieur de Marsac, Uncle Peter."

"Were you! He's a big handsome fellow. A girl would think of him."

She gave him a quick, bright look, then bent again. "He's awfully fascinating."

Rather sourly Peter agreed. He wished she had not concurred so enthusiastically. If only de Marsac had not been a Frenchman. The more cosmopolitan a man becomes, the more does his national instinct intensify. Up to a certain point Peter liked Frenchmen; beyond that he was doubtful. Frenchwomen, ah! yes. The most adorable of all. True, they loved too easily, gave with both hands. But was not that the secret of their charm?

If de Marsac wanted Pascaline he could probably win her. He was the conquering type of man. Queer he had never

married. And if he wed Pascaline, he would probably neglect her, keep a Parisian mistress, spend her money. They all did. Damn the fellow!

"Did you notice his nose?" she asked suddenly.

"Whose nose?"

"Monsieur de Marsac's."

"Has he a nose?"

"A remarkable one, a nose of the *noblesse*. But did you observe that curious upcurve of the nostrils? It gives him a mediæval look, like a Norman knight, one of those old crusaders."

"More likely a touch of Jewish blood. But you don't seem to be able to get the man out of your head."

"It's funny . . . I can't."

"Well, it's ten o'clock. Go to bed and dream of him. I'm going."

"To dream of Monsieur de Marsac?"

"I hope not. I want to spend a peaceful night. We must remember Spirelli is not here to protect us."

"Somehow I wish he was."

"We have the formidable Achille. We must search our rooms very carefully, before locking the doors."

They did so; particularly under the beds and in the big black wardrobes. They even looked up the chimneys. They then locked and bolted the doors leading to the corridor.

"I wouldn't lock the door between our two rooms," he suggested.

"I don't know why I ever did it."

"Close it, but don't turn the key."

"All right, Uncle Peter. Now, I'm going to kiss you good night."

For the first time their lips met, and it seemed to him that he touched the velvety petals of a flower.

.

After all, it was he who dreamed of de Marsac. . . .

Once more he was away on a hunting trip into the heart of Africa. Pascaline was with him, sleeping in the shadow of his tent on the edge of a dark, tropical forest. He had turned his back a moment when a huge ape parted the foliage and seized the girl. With a shriek she gave the alarm, and Peter grabbing up his rifle, dashed in pursuit. He could hear the brute crashing through the primitive jungle and, frantic with horror, he plunged forward like a madman. Then suddenly he could hear no more.

In his frenzy he ran blindly on, and that sense of fear and loss that comes to us only in dreams (and which exceeds anything in reality, because it is pure fear, pure loss held him on the rack. An anguish of the soul, appalling in its intensity, overwhelmed him. His loneliness of loss was too terrible to be conceived. Then all at once he came on them. The ape stood over the senseless girl, but as Peter burst into the clear space it broke of the huge branch of a tree and came at him roaring. Quite calmly he shot the brute through the chest. Even as it fell its face changed to that of a man. Surprise is an unknown emotion in dreams, and Peter saw without any astonishment that the ape had the face of de Marsac.

There it lay on the ground, with a bubbling hole in its back. Once more he turned the head to look at the face. . . . Lo! It was not the face of de Marsac at all—it was that of Spirelli. But the eyes were open, so Peter pressed some brandy to the tight lips, and the creature leapt to his feet. Again it had an ape face, and, huge brute, poised over him, poised uprearingly for a spring. . . .

All of a tremble, Peter found himself awake. His heart wanted to jolt out of his chest, but for a moment he felt a sense of unspeakable relief. Thank God! it wasn't true. A hideous nightmare. . . . Then, with a gasp, he realized that something *was* poisoning over him.

A pale faint light came through the long window, so that the room was only in semi-darkness. And against this vague

glamour was blotted a shadow that slowly took the form of a man. Above the foot of his bed it was reared, motionless, even more terrible in its menace than the ape of his dreams. A sense of powerlessness came over him. Whatever this horror was, it had him at its mercy. It seemed to hover like a hawk before the downward swoop, gloating over him, enjoying his fear.

Then he became aware of two eyes, dull brutish eyes, fringed with a bristle of hair. They burned in the black shadow, and a fetid odour stole to him. The thought came that this was still part of his dream, and he tried to cry out, but only made a hollow jibbering. Then the Thing seemed to rise higher still and . . . drop on him.

And now he was fighting for his very life. A great weight was on his chest. Hairy hands were squeezing his throat tighter, tighter. He clutched those hands, striving desperately to wrench away their deadly grip. He still sought to cry out, but only a choking sound came from him. The pressure on his throat was more than agony. He must give in. It was the end. . . .

Sudden, a thought—his automatic!—There it lay on the *table de nuit*. If he could only get it before the last breath of life was choked out of him! With a violent wrench he sought to twist away from those relentless hands. Then he made a grab for the pistol. He just reached it; his fingers closed on it. . . .

But his attacker had seen the move and, like a flash, gripped his wrist as if to break it. Peter could not raise the pistol, yet, convulsively, he pulled the trigger.

How the shot seemed to awaken the sleeping house! The hands were gone from his throat now, the weight from his chest. He was free, still alive; but so weak and exhausted. He could only lie there breathlessly. He was barely conscious of a noise in the corridor; then Achille burst into the room.

“What’s the matter, Monsieur? I heard a shot.”

Peter managed to make a faint murmur. "The Beast!" he breathed. "It attacked me in the dark."

"Where is it? I see nothing."

Achille was routing about like an eager hound, his cocked mauser in his hand.

"Perhaps I dreamed it all. . . . But no, my throat hurts too terribly where its fingers gripped."

"And then, Monsieur, I found the door open. It must have escaped that way."

A fear that flamed to agony came to Peter. His lips framed it.

"Pascaline! Good God! See if she's safe."

But even as he cried her name, the door of her room was thrown open and wild-eyed she ran to him. "What is it?" she cried.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I heard nothing till the shot. And you? Peter dear, you're not hurt?"

She had her arms around him and was gazing fearfully into his face.

"I'm better now. It was my turn to-night. I'm glad for that. But I'm getting up. We must hunt everywhere. Where are the Marteaux?"

"Locked in their room. Trust them to lie low when there's trouble about. . . . Did you hear that?"

"A shot! Sounds as if it came from the garden."

They listened. "Again," she cried.

"A shot, sure. Who can be shooting out there?"

All three stood tense, waiting. Then they heard a foot leap on to the terrace, a hasty hammering at the front door.

"Who can it be?" she whispered.

"Come on, Achille," snapped Peter. "Let's go and see."

She followed the two men down to the hall.

Achille threw open the door and a man stepped forward. It was Spirelli.

"I have amazed you," said the detective, a little out of

breath. He still held a revolver in his hand. Stupefied, they could only gaze at him.

"You thought I'd gone to Paris. That was only a blind. I judged that whoever is responsible for this affair would know that the coast was clear as far as I am concerned, and show himself."

"But where have you been?" came from Peter.

"Hidden in the garden all night. Cruel cold it was, too. If you've a nip of brandy handy, I'll be glad of it."

As Peter gave him the drink the memory of his dream came back. He had given the ape Spirelli brandy. It was curious. A shudder ran over him.

"What's the matter?" asked the detective. "You cold too?"

"A little. Tell me what happened."

"I was watching in the bushes near the cliff, when I heard a shot coming from the house. I waited a moment, then I got up from where I was crouching and made for the front door. Thought I: if anyone comes out I can get him."

"And you saw someone?"

"Yes. Just as I reached the back of the house and was about to run round to the front, I saw a shadow on the path that leads to the pigeon-house. I ran after it and fired twice, but it dodged into the underwood and disappeared. Then I hurried on here, for I was afraid for you. Tell me what happened?"

"The Thing appeared in my room this time. I got it in the neck all right."

"But how did it escape?"

"Must have opened the door and dashed down the corridor."

"And how did it get in?"

"That's what puzzles us. We examined the rooms last night, didn't we, Pascaline?"

"Ever so carefully."

"Can I have a look?" asked Spirelli.

"Come on. You may discover something."

But Spirelli, searching in every nook and corner, could find nothing. Then, with a magnifying glass and an electric torch, down he went on the floor, scrutinizing it intensely.

"You've been moving about a good deal," he remarked. "You've destroyed any trace of a strange foot."

Then as he drew near the wall, where a faint layer of dust testified to Suzanne's perfunctory cleaning, he uttered a sharp cry. Carefully he crawled forward to where stood the end of the big wardrobe, and there he stopped. Leaning on his elbows he stared at it thoughtfully. Sharply he tapped the heavy wood. "Did you search this?" he demanded.

"Thoroughly."

Spirelli rose and opened the door of the wardrobe. He ran his hand along the inside. "Do you notice," he said suddenly, "that in the interior the bottom of this armoire is a good eighteen inches from the floor?"

"Yes."

"And there's no drawer to take up that space."

"That's so."

"Then there must be a very considerable hollow."

Going again to the outside of the wardrobe, he examined the beading of the wood. Suddenly he wedged his fingers between the bottom and the floor, pulling out sharply. To their amazement the entire panel lifted up. Moving on concealed hinges it rose, revealing an opening about eighteen inches high by three feet broad.

"There you are," said the detective quietly. "A perfect hiding place. As you know, there is usually a large drawer in the bottom of these wardrobes; but in this case it has been eliminated and this space left unused. The panel at the side comes up like a flap. Anyone could slide in backwards, and close the flap again. Lying there he would be absolutely concealed. There's room enough for quite a big man to squeeze in at full length. As much room, for instance as in a coffin."

He beckoned to Peter. "Put your head close to the opening. - Do you smell anything?"

"By Jove!"

"It's the same animal smell I noticed when I first entered the room, only greatly intensified. Another proof the Thing has been concealed there. Now, let's see the wardrobe in the other room."

The same test showed the same device.

"There!" said Spirelli. "That's the explanation of how the intruder seemed to mock at locks and bars. It was snugly stowed in your rooms before ever you arrived in them. You had better knock off these hinged panels, so that no one can ever hide there again. But that's only the first step. How does the Thing get into the house at all? There's a more difficult problem. For the moment I admit it's got me beaten. But let us take this as an omen of success. It's the beginning; and in the end, don't be afraid, the triumph will be mine."

CHAPTER SIX

INSPECTOR MACHARD IS MYSTERIOUS

The following morning was amazingly fine—sunny and serene, as if a day of Indian summer had strayed behind to mingle with the drab procession of winter.

Pascaline was up early and fussing about the house. It was her nature to be matinal. She was too eager-minded, too active-limbed to lie long abed. The dawn called to her ardently, and if it was fine she would open her window and watch it come up the sky. On the other hand, by ten o'clock in the evening, she would begin to smother sleepy yawns.

So, after breakfast, she went out on the terrace and gazed about her approvingly. There was a mist of dew on the lawn. She slipped her slim feet into a pair of huge sabots

made of straw and lined with rabbit fur. They belonged to Peter, really, but she often borrowed them.

Gossamer spangled the short grass, and spidery filaments glistened among the laurels. Her feet made dark depressions on the gleamy turf and she laughed at their size. She was feeling unaccountably happy this morning. With the resilience of youth she had recovered from the alarm of the night. The hail of this radiant morning made it all seem so unreal. The old house basked sleekly in the sun. Nothing wicked-looking about it now. If it were not for its ghastly associations and the secret it withheld, she would almost be fond of it.

Poor house! It was not responsible for the demon that possessed it. Well, perhaps they would succeed in driving out that demon, and others would learn to love it; but for her it would always be haunted, a house of fear.

Peter still slept. His window blinds were drawn. She had listened to his breathing before coming down,—a little hurried and difficult she thought. He had been exultant over the discovery of the hiding-places in the wardrobes, but the muscles of his throat ached so painfully he could not bear to touch them. Curious, how in the blond light of the morning the midnight visitation seemed like a terrible dream. It wasn't though. There were, alas! the proofs. How would it all end?

Such were her thoughts as she went round by the kitchen where Madame Marteau was scouring her floor. Kneeling on a bit of sacking, the old woman looked up and wrung her floor-cloth into the slop pail. Then, she scratched her grey moustache inquiringly.

"Did you hear anything last night, Madame Marteau?"

"Not a sound, Mademoiselle."

"Not even a shot?"

"Nothing. We sleep like the blessed dead, Marteau and me. We lock the door and push the *commode* against it. Then we push the bed between the wall and the *commode*.

If the devil himself was to try, he couldn't rouse us."

"I'm glad you're so careful. Isn't it a glorious morning?"

"May be, Mademoiselle, for them as has time to enjoy it; but for them as has to scrub floors it don't make much difference whether it rains or shines. Anyway, it can't last. We'll have a dirty time, and that soon."

"I hope not. Look at that robin on the lawn. A sign of winter, I suppose. What a red breast it has."

"Looks as if it had been wallowing in the gore of a corpse."

"Gracious! What a morbid mind you have, Madame Marteau."

"Not at all, Mademoiselle. It's the house we live in. We can't get away from it. Every step we take is one nearer the corruption of the tomb."

Unable to deny this mournful reflection, Pascaline went round to the back. A faint air was stirring, and some late leaves floated down sunnily. Those that littered the path were crimson and brown. They crackled under her big sabots. Coming from the direction of the old pigeon-house, suddenly she saw Spirelli. She stood aside to let him pass.

His head was bare, his hair thrown back as if wind-blown. His pale face was pinched and strained. As he looked at her, there was an expression almost pleading in his deep-set eyes. She bent her head in grave greeting.

His manner, however, was almost indifferent as he pointed to the pigeon-house.

"I've just been trying to get in there, but it's locked."

"Yes, I believe the key is lost."

"Then no one's ever examined that place?"

"Not so far as I know."

"Curious. Well, I'm going to break in."

"Nothing suspicious about it, is there?"

"Only this . . . someone was in there last night."

"Are you sure?"

"Yesterday I tied a black thread between the handle and the jamb of the door and this morning it was broken."

"Really."

"Yes. I must have a look in that place. This morning I made a thorough examination of the basement again, but I can find nothing suspicious. I don't see how our assassin enters and leaves the house."

He looked thoughtfully at the trees that overhung the roof.

"But no, it wouldn't be possible that way. Well, I can only keep on nosing round like those spaniels of your friend, Monsieur de Marsac."

There was a faint irony in his voice, but his eyes were inscrutable.

"I wish you success," she said coldly, and went on. Beyond the pigeon-house the vista of the sands smote her vision and, coming slowly towards her, she could see the bent figure of old Ragon. His eyes were lowered; his lips were muttering. Looking up suddenly, he beheld her framed in that rich foliage of decay, a gracious vision of youth and beauty. For a long moment he stood, gazing at her as if transfixed. His beard was silvery in the sunshine and there was a wistful look on his wasted face. Moved by compassion she descended to speak to him, but a bitter look in his shark-grey eyes checked her. It was he who spoke.

"Yes, she was young like you. She was pretty as a picture, like you. And where is she now? Lying in the cold ground with not a stone to mark her resting-place. I did not see them bury her. I would not go. I was out there where the rocks are wild. I was all alone, talking to the sea. The sea understands me. I was telling the sea that soon I too will lie there; but first I have to revenge her, to kill the man that killed my girl. And I will, I will. . . ."

She shrank back, frightened at his vehemence. He went on:

"You are beautiful. You remind me of her. But beware! You will perish as she perished. There is danger in the air. I feel it, I know it. It's up there." He pointed

to the White House with his bony hand. "The grave yawns again. There will be another, and soon, soon. . . ."

His voice trailed into a vague murmur; and once more sunk in apathy, he turned and left her.

She felt afraid. Her sunny mood had vanished. Sadly she made her way back to the house. Peter was pacing the terrace in a dressing-gown of green silk embroidered with humming birds, and smoking a cigarette in a long ivory holder. He greeted her.

"I'm in the vilest temper. My neck hurts horribly and my heart's kicking up an infernal rumpus."

"Smoking cigarettes won't improve it."

"Bah! they can only hasten by a few weeks the inevitable end. My great desire is to pop off gracefully. But I don't want to do it in this hole. Let's get out of here. I'll order the car now, and by night we'll be well on our way to God Knows Where."

"I never thought of you as a 'quitter,' Uncle Peter. It was always I who suggested that. But" She looked up at the smiling sky and her sunny mood came back. "Don't you think everything looks better? Clearing up, as it were. I have a feeling the climax is near, and we will come out all right. Don't you think we might endure it a few days more?"

He took out a coin. "We'll toss for it: Heads chuck it, Tails stick it. . . . Tails it is. Well, I suppose we must hang on a bit longer, but I tell you, my girl, I'm getting fed up."

"Have you seen Monsieur Spirelli?"

"Yes, only for a moment though. A telephone call came for him and he had to leave at once for Tremorac. He was very sorry to go. He wanted to examine that old pigeon-house."

"You might ask him to dinner again."

"I did; but he won't accept, confound him! I believe he side-steps you."

"So much the better."

"Yes, but I enjoy talking to the beggar. He fascinates me. I don't know yet whether I trust him or not, but . . . I like him."

"Ah! I've known him a great deal longer than you, Uncle Peter."

"And you don't like him?"

"I hate him."

"That's positive, anyway. If one can't be loved, the next best is to be hated. But there . . . Suzanne is ringing the bell. Let's go and have lunch."

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In the afternoon, as Peter lounged on the terrace, he had an unexpected visitor.

Not that visitors were unexpected now. Indeed hardly a day passed without two or three of them. In fact, the house was becoming comparatively animated. But this visitor was an important one. It was Inspector Machard of the local police.

The Inspector halted on the top step of the terrace and made a military salute. He had a red-grained face, and a huge, frizzy moustache. One's first impression was that it was false, the sort of moustache funny gendarmes have in Revues. He was round of jowl, with a tunic that bulged in front; but the bulge looked solid and sturdy.

"How do you do," said Peter lazily. "Excuse me not rising, but my heart is behaving badly to-day. Suzanne, a chair for Monsieur the Inspector."

Monsieur Machard sat down on the edge of one.

"Suzanne, the bottle of port and a glass."

Monsieur Machard moistened his very red lips with an appreciative tongue-tip.

"Now, we're all set," said Peter pouring out a glass. "What can I do for you, Monsieur Machard?"

"Well, Monsieur, it's this. A message has just come from

the Prefect of Police in Paris. He wants me to take over the investigation here."

"But . . . there's Monsieur Spirelli."

"Monsieur Spirelli has been recalled for the time being. They have, I believe, urgent need of him at Headquarters on quite a different matter."

"I'm rather surprised."

"Me too. I was quite busy with this other affair."

"You mean the skeleton found at Le Gildo?"

"Yes, I traced the pin, as you have probably heard, to the Chinaman Ah Foo, and I confronted him with a picture of the dead girl. It seems she used to sell fish there. He recognized it, showing every sign of fear. I have no doubt we should soon have induced him to tell all he knows, only he cannot speak. Under appropriate pressure, he wrote something in his own language. It may be a confession, or it may implicate someone else. We have sent it to the Chinese Embassy to be translated."

"But you don't suspect the Chinaman?"

"Not any more than the others."

"What others?"

"Well, Monsieur, I may as well speak freely with you, as you are in a way interested in the affair. There are three men who could, we think, throw light on the murder of Angèle Ragon, and either of these might be concerned in her death."

Inspector Machard paused impressively, strained a mouthful of port through his mighty moustache, then, with a solemn frown, went on:

"First, there's her father, the old fisherman. Ragon is an ex-convict with a record for manslaughter. A violent man. He was the last to see his daughter alive. Of course, there is nothing definite against him, but . . ."

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"Who will say he is not worth watching? Then, there's the Chinaman. So far as signs can go, he admits the orig-

inal ownership of the pin, but that's as far as we can get for the moment. How it came out of his possession remains to be told. We have a case against the Chinaman, and if he makes any effort to get away he will be arrested. And now, we come to the third."

The inspector took another sip, then sucked his moustache thoughtfully.

"The third is the patron of the Chinaman, the Doctor Chavas. There we have something mysterious. Since the discovery of the remains of Angèle Ragon, Doctor Chavas has disappeared. Before that, during the ten years of his residence, he never left Auberon. Now that may be a coincidence, but it seems curious, does it not?"

"But may he not have gone on a visit somewhere?"

"We have no trace of his departure."

"Strange. Perhaps he has been killed too, and you will be finding his remains one of these days. This is really the most ghastly country I ever lived in. Crime on crime. Mystery on mystery. Machard, it's devilish, that's what it is. Devilish!"

Monsieur Machard lit a cigarette from a blue packet, and concurred with a solemn nod.

"We have no reason to suppose that he met with foul play," he went on. "He may have taken his own life. It is too soon to answer that yet. We are endeavouring to trace him, and we shall probably get on his track. All this is, of course, strictly between ourselves. And now, Monsieur, to come to the matter on hand."

"Taking over Spirelli's job . . . You don't want to sleep in the house, do you?"

"No. That's unnecessary. But to-morrow I would like to make a thorough search of the cellars. Monsieur Spirelli has promised to post me up to date on everything, so that I can begin where he leaves off."

"Poor chap! I'm afraid he'll be pretty sick at having to go."

"Duty is duty, Monsieur. What I want to do is to watch the grounds every night. From to-morrow, either I or Corporal Boulet will be on guard."

"I hope you'll have more success than Spirelli had. Come to see me before you start on your vigil, and I'll make you a hot toddy."

Inspector Machard promised and went heavily away. Peter was dozing a little when he heard a voice cheerfully resonant.

"Hello, there, my dear chap! . . . Ah! pardon me. I didn't notice you were sleeping."

"Hello, de Marsac! No, I was only meditating with my eyes shut."

"How's the health?"

"Rotten. Heart's giving me hell. Neck too. Sore as the devil where that brute tried to scrag me."

De Marsac stared in amazement. "You don't mean to tell me the thing came again last night."

"That's just what I do mean to tell you."

"I can't . . . I can't realize it."

"You would if you had my neck."

"Well, of all the . . . But you take it coolly enough."

"No good fussing. I'm still alive. One gets used to everything—even attempted assassination."

He told de Marsac something of his experience, remaining silent, however, on the discovery of the hiding-places. De Marsac listened intensely, his dark blue eyes riveted on Peter's face. When the recital was finished, he was silent for a little. Then he said:

"By Heaven! You make me wish I were a detective instead of a judge. I feel I could show those thick-headed fellows something. What's the matter with them? It's an outrage that these things continue and that the police can do nothing. I feel the disgrace more keenly because you are a stranger, and I am your neighbour. This is my particular part of the country, don't you know, and I am jealous of its

fair fame. I say, couldn't you let me sleep in the house for a night or two? I'd like some of those things to happen to me."

"You're too valuable a man to risk your life here."

"Rubbish! I'd enjoy it. You will, won't you?"

"What about to-morrow night?"

"Alas! I'll be in Rennes to-morrow night. I'm presiding at a dinner to welcome the new Prefect."

"You're such a busy man. Well, the night after?"

"That will do."

"Have dinner here."

"Charmed."

"That's decided, then. What have you got in your shooting bag?"

"Two cock pheasants. I brought them over to ask you to accept them."

"Beauties. Delightful of you. We'll eat them when you come to dinner."

They went on to talk of other things, but de Marsac seemed curiously abstracted. He kept gazing round inquiringly. Peter guessed he was looking for Pascaline and chuckled to himself. He knew that the girl was reading in her room, probably unconscious of a visitor, and that if only he called her she would come down gladly enough. At last, however, he began to feel mean about it, and was going to take pity on the man's impatience, when de Marsac asked:

"And your charming niece? She is well, I hope?"

"A lot better than I am, thank God! She got off easy last night."

"But you ought not to expose her to such risks. Imagine if it had been her."

As he said this, de Marsac showed agitation. There was even a note of anger in his voice.

"I have imagined it," said Peter. "It's what I've been imagining all morning. I put it up to her, but she refused to go just yet. I think her sporting blood is roused. How-

ever, you're right. We should shove off. Well, we'll eat those birds first."

"You might give Mademoiselle Pascaline my *amitiés*."

"All right. She's in her room, I think."

"Ah! I have some books I fancy might interest her. I'll send them over."

"Do. She's a great reader."

It was ungenerous of him, he thought. He might so easily have called the girl, perhaps gladdened two ardent hearts. What he did not know was that Pascaline was peeping down on them. But even if she had wanted, she couldn't have come, for she had washed her hair and was drying it. So, quite gratuitously, Peter felt mean and malicious. However, he made a final effort to reinstate himself in his self-esteem.

"Don't forget our little dinner. We'll have a ripping evening."

"I won't. I look forward to it keenly."

Alas! Man plans but the devil bans. Little thought Peter that the proposed dinner would never take place.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PETER BREWS GROG

"Yes," said Spirelli, "I am a true cosmopolitan. Born in Athens of an Italian father and an English mother, I was educated in Vienna and Paris."

He had returned about half-past nine from having supper at Tremorac, but though he looked tired out mentally and physically, Peter had dragged him into the dining room.

Pascaline had retired early, and Peter wanted someone to talk to. So he made Spirelli sit in the padded-leather arm-chair before the fire, pretexting that the detective needed a hot grog.

Peter was rapidly developing a taste for society, and though he refused to drink himself, he delighted to prepare it for others. Now he settled comfortably in his own chair, quite content that he had his companion primed up to the point of volubility. For himself, gorgeous in a yellow satin dressing-gown with a pattern of purple pelicans, and smoking a cigarette in a long holder of ebonite, he was satisfied to be a serene listener.

"I know intimately every capital in Europe," went on Spirelli. "I speak five languages with confidence and can make myself understood in seven others. In fact I have invented a system by which a man can get a working grip on a language in a week. It is based on the speech of the two-year child, or of the primitive savage. I have compiled a vocabulary of three hundred fundamental words. They deal with the expression of every-day needs. The verb is expressed in the present, and the negative is used to indicate the contrary of the adverb."

"Something like Chinook."

"My system is more scientific. It can be applied to any language and can be learnt in a week. Some day I'm going to write a book on it. . . . But to resume, I was telling you about my parentage."

"Yes, go ahead, please."

"My father was an Italian Jew turned Catholic, my mother a Protestant. My own education was strictly scientific, though I have a sentimental regard for the church. Nevertheless, I think that the two great curses of humanity are nationality and religion, or, if you like, race prejudice and bigotry. They are at the bottom of all wars and social convulsions."

"Are you a socialist?"

"No. I believe in the Man, not the Mob. Communism is better than Socialism. It has more "guts." It is ruthless, radical. It is based on selfishness and force. Socialism believes in the unselfishness of human nature. All wrong.

Selfishness is the living force, eternal, unconquerable. It is the bed rock on which we must build. Of course it is hard to say what selfishness is. It has its heights. Sacrifice and renunciation are manifestations of it. Crude selfishness is ignoble, but sublimated selfishness may be divine. However, I bore you with my digressions."

"Not at all. Let me mix you another grog."

"Not so strong this time. . . . To return to my parents. My father was a dealer in precious stones and travelled in Europe in pursuance of his affairs. We lived in turn in every great capital. I never played with other children, and my education was carried on by tutors. I was, however, very precocious. I began to attend the University at sixteen and by twenty had taken my degree as a bachelor of Science."

"Nothing like an early start. Have a fresh cigar?"

"I will, thanks. . . . I was no prize-winner though. I was always too much interested in life to give all my time to books. Accordingly, I studied human nature high and low, but found the low the more interesting."

"Do you find your grog strong enough?"

"Too strong. But it's banished my fatigue. Well, to continue my history . . . From twenty to twenty-four I travelled, visited every part of the world, studying, observing. Ah! Monsieur, if one has open eyes, one can see much. My four years of world travel were far more to me than my four years in the University. I did not waste my time. In three months a man can steep himself in the atmosphere of a country, so that often his impressions are more vivid than they would be after three years. India, China, Japan, I learned to know them. Then Egypt, Arabia, Persia. As a Jew, I found affinities everywhere. Ostensibly I was carrying on my father's business. His grand ambition was to create the finest collar of pearls in the world, and I was supposed to hunt out and report on unusually beautiful ones. Then, my father and mother were assassinated in

Sofia, and his treasured collection of pearls disappeared.”

“Stolen?”

“I never got to the bottom of that. Maybe the government of the day had a finger in it. Anyway, a war was on and he was only a Jew. Life was cheap, everything at sixes and sevens. There was never any inquiry. When I came back, my parents were dead, my fortune lost. From being a rich man I was plunged into poverty. It embittered me. I became an enemy to society, a rebel against authority. And from an anarchist to a criminal is but a step. . . . I say, I hope I’m not boring you with all this?”

“No, please go on. I’m frightfully interested.”

“You know, I don’t believe that human nature is honest. Men are naturally thieves and liars, just as children are. Only the fear of punishment keeps them straight. The difference between the average man and the criminal is only one of degree. The criminal has less fear of the law and expresses his instincts in acts. Potentially we are all crooks and murderers. The rich man robs the poor, the poor (when he can) the rich. And who is there who would not sometimes kill, if thoughts alone could kill? I had been robbed of my inheritance—well, I would myself join the ranks of the robbers.”

Spirelli flicked the ash from his cigar and stared a moment at the fire. Peter lit a fresh cigarette and watched him. The unharmed side of the man’s face was towards him. It was long, thin, pale. At that moment it was sternly handsome. A look of bitter memory smouldered in the deep-set eyes. After a little he went on.

“So it was, deliberately, philosophically, I took up a career of crime. But between theory and practice is quite a step, and it was long before I could prevail on myself to actually rob. I decided to specialize in jewels, and so despoil only those who could afford to pay me tribute. I have often robbed the rich with one hand and given to the poor with the other. I don’t know if I would have become

even a bandit of this kind, had not the scientific side of it seduced me. I was the first to realize the value of stupefying gases in the carrying out of a robbery."

"I know," said Peter. "It's the '*dernier cri*' in crime."

"At first I operated alone, chiefly in luxurious hotels; but in time I became known and suspected, so that I had to take accomplices. From then on I directed, rarely taking a hand in a job. Only, once in a while the excitement seduced me. I thought the War would save me; but when my face was sufficiently healed I found myself drawn into the game again. It was in Paris, while at the head of a safe-opening gang, I got caught. I think you know the rest. Well, that's all wiped out, if it is ever possible to wipe out the past. I wonder? And now, to come to the matter in hand. You know, I was tired to-night."

"You looked it."

"I had a hard day. I was up early and made another fruitless search of the basement. That reminds me, I was just going to look into that pigeon-house when a message came for me. I must do that to-morrow. When I got to Tremorac, I got a nasty blow. You have probably heard."

"Yes, Machard was here. I'm awfully sorry."

"Honest fellow! I've nothing to say against him, but it's disheartening. I persuaded the chief to let me come down here, and now he withdraws me. More important work, he tells me. Well, I wish Machard all the luck in the world."

"When do you go?"

"Oh, I've not quite finished yet. I'll be here over another night. I have to put Machard *en rapport*, and, by the way, I might as well tell you all I know up to date."

"That's decent of you."

"I know what an interest you take. Indeed, I have all along suspected you of doing a little detective work on your own. Well, that's no affair of mine; but you may be interested to learn what I have been doing."

"Rather."

"I spent most of the afternoon cultivating the Père Marteau, getting him comfortably fuddled. You see, I wanted to search his cottage. I could not do so at night, because a widowed daughter stays there. I had to make my search by day, and had to get the old man out of the way. So, having left him sound asleep in his cobbler's shop, I stole into his cottage by a back window. I had to force the window. For some reason they kept it and the door carefully locked."

A little smile was on Spirelli's thin lips, as he gazed dreamily at the fire.

"Go on," said Peter impatiently.

"Where was I? Ah! yes, entering the window. Well, the place was like any other Breton interior; earthen floor, brass-mounted *armoïre*, a grandfather's clock, two high cupboard beds. There was, however, a large oak coffer which intrigued me. It was fastened, but after much difficulty I managed to pick the lock."

Again Spirelli paused, gazing with sleepy eyes at the fireglow.

"What did you find?" prompted Peter.

"Nothing that will aid us to discover the author of the Blanc Castel crimes, but interesting all the same. I found a large quantity of the finest linen marked with the initial 'W'; also a smaller quantity of valuable lace. I also found quite a lot of jewelry, rings, brooches, bracelets, and a gold watch with the initials 'G.A.'"

"Ah! What did you make of all that?"

"Not a great deal. Only, the old American lady who was killed here was a Mrs. Winston, and the young artist was called Gaston Arnaud."

"Good God! You don't suspect the Marteaux of killing them?"

"No. But they certainly robbed the dead. You see, in

the confusion that followed the crimes, it was easy to get away with a lot of stuff."

"The beasts!"

"I don't blame them. The temptation was great. After all, as I said, none of us are really honest. You wouldn't steal, of course, because you are rich. You have no temptation. But put yourself in the place of Marteau—how do you know what you would do?"

"I suppose you're right."

"May be I'm not. Who has a right to think they're right? . . . Well, as I was examining the stuff thoughtfully enough, I heard a step. Looking out of the window, I beheld Marteau reeling towards the house. I had just time to close the coffer when he was fumbling at the door. Where should I hide? There were only the two cupboard beds. I chose one at random, climbed up, crawled in, and crouched behind a big red eiderdown quilt. I believe the fellow suspected something."

"The devil!"

"Yes, drunk as he was, he looked round carefully. Evidently he found everything all right, for he never thought of examining the coffer. Instead, with rich and racy oaths, he mounted up on it. Behind the bloated belly of my red quilt I must confess I waited anxiously. What was he going to do? He was unfastening his collar, throwing off his coat. It was evident he intended to sleep off his souse. Good! but God send he didn't choose the bed I was in. Great luck! He didn't. I heard him clamber into the other one, and in a few minutes he was snoring. Then I got out softly and made my escape."

"How funny! And this explains the queer behaviour of Madame Marteau."

"Yes, her appearance of having a guilty conscience. It also proves to my mind that, as far as these crimes go, we can eliminate the Marteaux."

"So much the better. I hate to think that the woman whose excellent omelettes I have so often enjoyed is a blood-stained Borgia. Are you going to do anything about it?"

"In the meantime, nothing. It won't help any. And now there's something I'd like you to do for me, if it appeals to you."

"Willingly."

"You know the Abbé Grégoire?"

"A little."

"You told me once he asked you to visit him and he would read you passages from his great work."

"He did."

"Would you mind accepting his invitation to-morrow afternoon? I know it's rather an ordeal, but it may be very important."

"All right."

"And after you are sated with Gilles of Brittany, you might casually bring the conversation round to that grey-green sweater he wears under his *soutane*. You will see the sleeves covering his wrists. Try to get some information about that hand-knitted jersey."

"I'll do my best. So you think the person you saw in the garden may be the Abbé?"

Spirelli shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?"

"By Jove!" said Peter suddenly. "I, too, have a theory."

"I'll be glad to hear it."

"No, wait a little. It's too fantastic. Wait till to-morrow."

"All right," said Spirelli wearily. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go to bed now. I've an idea we'll all sleep sound and undisturbed this night."

"I hope so. Good night."

When he had gone, Peter smoked another cigarette.

"I wonder," he muttered. "God! If it's *that*, it's too horrible for words. . . ."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TWO AVOWALS

The following morning Peter was up and lounging gorgeously on the terrace when Spirelli hailed him.

"I'm going to open that pigeon-house of yours. Want to come?"

"Right-o!"

Arrived there, Spirelli produced a powerful steel jimmy.

"I always carry one on my travels. I've tried skeleton keys and pick-locks on this door without success. I am afraid now I have to damage your property."

"Go ahead."

In a few minutes, with a straining and splintering of wood, Spirelli had the door open. The floor, sunk some inches below the door sill, was littered with musty straw.

"Looks as if it had been used as a dog kennel," remarked Peter.

They entered. The air was fusty and stale.

"Well, I don't see anything here," he continued, inspecting the rough walls that rose to the peaked roof. But the detective, who was probing among the straw, gave a sharp exclamation. In a moment he was on his knees, scraping at the litter.

"A ring!" cried Peter; "an iron ring fixed in the floor."

"Looks to me like the handle of a trap door," said Spirelli, continuing to clear away the straw.

He was right. Sunk solidly in the oak flooring, a trap door was revealed.

"Stand aside and I'll open it," said Spirelli.

He stood astride the trap and, catching the ring with both hands, pulled up strongly. The door rose suddenly, un-

covering a yawning gulf of blackness. Peter looked over. "I fancy I see a gleam of water."

Spirelli broke a plaster flake from the wall and dropped it. There was a tinkling splash.

"Profound, isn't it. Must be a good sixty feet down."

They both peered into the blackness.

"Why didn't I think of it?" said Peter suddenly. "This must be our well. See, there's a pipe which enters the masonry about six feet from the top. From that it must go underground to the house. There's a big pump, I remember, just outside of the kitchen. This must be the source of our water supply."

"You're right," said Spirelli. "Look, there are iron cleats cemented in the masonry. That's for workmen to go down and clean the well from time to time. You've never had it cleaned, have you?"

"Not yet."

"You should. . . . Hum! Nothing of any significance here." He dropped the trap and carefully restrewed the straw over it. "It's what you call a mare's nest. Let's go. I hear voices. Already there are arrivals at the house."

It proved to be the Inspector and Corporal Boulet, who had come to examine the basement.

"I hope you'll have more success than I had," laughed Spirelli. "I've been over it twice."

"Third time's sometimes lucky," grunted the Inspector.

"Sometimes.—Well, good wishes."

"Will you stay to lunch?" said Peter to Spirelli. But the Italian shook his head.

"I'm spending my morning at Auberon. I have business there. I'll be back in the afternoon to write up my reports. But then, probably, you won't be here."

"No, I'm going to interview the Père Grégoire."

"Good. Au revoir."

.

The afternoon was mild and sunny, so that Pascaline decided she would sit on the terrace and finish some sewing. Peter had gone in the car to Tremorac. She was alone in the house, she thought.

No, she was not alone either; for, as she settled comfortably in her wicker armchair, she observed Spirelli at the other end of the terrace. He was sitting at a small table writing busily. Beyond looking up for a moment, he took no notice of her.

She appreciated in him what would have been rudeness in another. He was certainly playing the game, effacing himself relentlessly. At times she would have welcomed a more moderate attitude. Somehow she had lost her fear of him,—indeed she was inclined to pity him. After all, was he entirely to blame? Had she not in her craven fear submitted to the marriage ceremony? It was only afterwards, when she realized that he really loved her, that she had a revulsion of feeling for him. Hate, horror had flamed in her; but he had always treated her with tenderness. Was it something in her blood that rebelled against him, some racial antipathy? It could not be his scarred face; for now she knew the cause of it, it no longer aroused aversion in her. No, there was something else. The man was profound, inscrutable. She did not understand him, could not trust him.

Well, there he was, a quiet figure in black, writing away as if she did not exist. In a way she felt snubbed. Surely there was a middle course, a tepid *rapprochement*. Even though he was her husband, they might be politely amiable. But, after all, perhaps his attitude was the most appropriate.

So meditating, she sat demurely at her end of the terrace. Then she tried to put him out of her thoughts and only partially succeeded. She tried to think of Peter, of de Marsac; but the personality of the silent man at the other end of the terrace always supervened. She was relieved at last when she saw him gather his papers together and rise to go.

As he was entering the house he looked towards her and bowed politely. He had already crossed the threshold when, as if by an afterthought, he turned and came towards her. She was on her guard now, cold, antagonistic.

"I've just been finishing up," he said quietly. "I leave to-morrow."

Taken by surprise she looked up at him. "Oh! so soon."

"Yes, but not too soon for me. As you can imagine, it can only be painful for me to remain here."

She was silent. He went on gently. "It's been a great joy to see you again, but . . . it's been a hurt as well. However, I'm happy you have found one who can protect you better than I could. He's a good fellow. I hope you'll never leave him."

She sensed an inner meaning in his words. "I understand. . . . You'd like Peter to marry me when—I am free."

He nodded gravely.

"But he won't. I've already asked him."

"That's perhaps why."

"He swears he'll be an uncle to me always; but he absolutely refuses to marry me."

"Well, I'm thankful you'll be under his care. I hope you won't be long in getting your divorce and, if there's any way I can aid you, I will do so."

"Won't we see you again? Of course it's a wretched business, but why can't we remain friends?"

"That would be impossible—for me. When I leave here to-morrow I will never see you again."

For a little she looked down at her sewing.

"I suppose it's best," she said at last. "Well, you've been good to me and . . . I'll think of you often."

"Just once in a while, if you wouldn't mind. You see I've loved you as I loved your mother, only in a different way."

"You mean that you were . . . her lover?"

"Never! You thought that?"

"I . . . I suppose I did. From what you told me I had to infer it."

"Good God! You believed that. No wonder you shrank from me. It is all my fault. I told you too little. Listen . . . I swear by all that I hold sacred your mother was never my mistress. Ah! if you'd seen her as I saw her at the last, you would never have imagined that. Poor woman! She was sick, tired of life, without a friend."

"And you stood by her."

"To the end. She was still beautiful, with an amazing knowledge of life. At first she merely interested me, then I became her devoted friend. I loved her; but it was the love of a son for a mother, of a mother for her son."

"I begin to understand."

"I see I should have told you more. Well, it's too late now. But I wish you all the joy in the world, and a gentle life that was never hers. One thing I'd like to ask. . . ."

He took from his pocket-book a small photograph.

"Will you keep this in remembrance of one who loved you with his whole soul, who will always love you? And thinking of my love you will perhaps forgive me the wrong I have done you."

Unbelievably she stared at it: "Why, that's not you?"

"It was.—Before an Austrian shell made a gargoyle of me. I want you to think of me like that.—Not like this." He pointed to his scar. "Think of the face in that picture as the real me."

"I don't know that I want to," she said thoughtfully looking at the photograph. It was the face of a young intellectual. The silky hair was thrown back from the high brow; the dark, deep-set eyes seemed to flash; the nose was imperiously arched, and the mouth and chin firm and shapely. A face of a Jewish type, bold, yet sensitive; at once poet, student, rebel.

"No, I don't know if I want to think of you like that," she continued. "Your scar is a glory, not a disfigurement. I

prefer to think of you as you are. But . . . have you not a picture of my mother?"

"Alas no! or I would have given it to you."

"Well, thank you for this. I'll keep it gratefully. We'll always be friends, won't we?"

He only nodded. She rose and gave him her hand. He held it with both of his, looking into her face. For a long moment they stood thus . . . then suddenly he released her hand. A resonant voice came up to them. They had not noticed de Marsac crossing the lawn. Quickly she dropped the photograph into her blouse.

"*Bonjour*, Mademoiselle," hailed de Marsac cheerily. "I have brought over some books that might amuse you. I am leaving for Rennes in an hour, and I would like to speak to your uncle for a moment before I go."

"I'm so glad to see you. Uncle is out;—is it anything I could tell him?"

"No, it doesn't matter. But if you don't mind I'll join you for a little, if I may."

"Do. Come up and we'll have tea."

De Marsac mounted the steps of the terrace at the same time as Spirelli entered the house. The two men bowed coldly.

De Marsac always seemed to come into the closed-in garden like a breeze from the sea. He was so radiant, so high-spirited. . . . His blue eyes were dancing, his white teeth gleamed laughingly. He was dressed for the town, but she liked him better in his rough tweeds.

"You look very grand," she smiled.

"Ah! you mock me. But alas! I'm addressing a meeting at Rennes to-night. Beastly bore. I hate to go."

"Uncle Peter says we should never do anything we don't want to do. We should be true to our temperaments if we want to be on good terms with life."

"May be, but we're not all wealthy enough to follow his advice. Besides, there's work and duty. I love work and

I am the slave of duty. No, without self-discipline no one can be happy. I have to attend this political affair, but I'll be back to-morrow evening for dinner with you."

"Yes, I am delighted."

"That's splendid of you. You don't know how keenly I look forward to it. All the time I'm making my stupid speech to those tiresome lawyers, I shall be thinking of your dinner. . ."

"I hope it will inspire you."

"Of your dinner and *you*," he continued. "No, it is you who will inspire me."

"You added that out of politeness. I'm sure it is the dinner."

"Alas, no. You have no idea, Mademoiselle, how I have developed the habit of thinking of you lately. I never met anyone like you. You're so different, so sweet, so . . ."

She rose hastily. "Excuse me a moment, I must see about tea." As she went she was thinking: "Monsieur de Marsac is evidently feeling gay. Is he taking advantage of Peter's absence to try and flirt with me?"

When she returned she was careful not to sit too near him. As she poured the tea, de Marsac had an air of wishing to continue the interrupted conversation.

"You know," he began, "joking apart, I do worry a good deal about you."

"Why?"

"Here you are in this house surrounded by all sorts of dangers."

"I have Uncle to protect me."

"But he's . . . old."

"No, he isn't," she said indignantly. "It's because of his grey hair you think that; and that's because he's had lots of trouble. He's young, comparatively."

De Marsac bowed meekly. She went on:

"Then, there's Achille who's afraid of no one. Last, but not least, there's Monsieur Spirelli."

"Ah! Monsieur Spirelli." De Marsac's face became suddenly serious. He bent forward, looking at her with grave eyes. "Listen, Mademoiselle, may I speak to you as a friend, a devoted friend, one who would do more for your safety than ever you dream of?"

"Please go on," she told him, impressed by his intensity.

"I want to ask you a question: do you trust Monsieur Spirelli?"

"Why not?"

"Do you know that he's an ex-criminal, a renegade? Even now there are many in the underworld who would shoot him at sight. He's a traitor to his fellows."

"Well, so long as he isn't a traitor to the cause he represents now . . ."

"Isn't he? . . . That's what none of us know. He may be playing a deeper game than we dream of. Now, I don't want to destroy the faith of you and your uncle in any one; but with this man you admit into your house on familiar terms,—don't you think you ought to be a little careful?"

"Hush! he may be near."

"I just wanted to warn you. I don't trust Monsieur Spirelli. Of course, as a judge of the criminal court I may be prejudiced. I believe: once a crook always a crook. But in the present case, I am actuated by my feelings for you. I fear, Mademoiselle, that this man may do you some harm. You should not, I am convinced, trust yourself alone with him. You are too young, too innocent."

He got up suddenly and caught her hand.

"You know, I've thought of you ever since I can remember. I mean, I've thought of someone just like you, an inner dream, a sacred ideal."

He was looking down on her, his eyes glistening, his voice vibrant. She felt the thrill of his finger-tips, and she wanted to withdraw her hand, but she could not. She wondered what would happen next—not unpleasantly. Then, she heard a cold, hard-edged voice.

"Good-bye, Mademoiselle, I'm going now."

It was Spirelli leaving the house. De Marsac turned round, releasing her hand. Yes, she was glad to get it back.

"*Au revoir*, Monsieur Spirelli," she called.

She and de Marsac watched the tall figure in black crossing the lawn. Tea was resumed with every-day conversation. Then de Marsac rose to catch his train.

"Alas! I must tear myself away. You will think of what I have said, won't you?"

"I will."

"Hark! the wind's rising. The tree-tops are beginning to swish about. Look at the scurrying clouds. If I know anything of weather, we're going to have a wild night. May your good angel guard you, my dear . . . child. Till to-morrow evening, then, we'll say good-bye."

"Till to-morrow evening, *au revoir*, Monsieur."

CHAPTER NINE

THE ABBÉ GRÉGOIRE HAS AN AUDITOR

The Abbé Grégoire, sitting with pen poised over the final chapter of the fifth book of his great history of Gilles de Rais, Duke of Brittany, was startled by the ringing of his garden bell.

With an exclamation of impatience he rose from his desk. Who could be coming to bother him at such a moment? His visitors were rare, for his reputation as a recluse and a scholar protected him from vain and unprofitable intrusion.

First, he would see who was this disturber of his labour. So cautiously crossing his garden, he mounted to the ledge that ran along near the top of his wall and peeped over.

Bon Dieu! That silly Englishman with the eye-glass. Ignorant, arrogant puppy! What was the fool wanting with him at this critical time?

Peter, looking up suddenly, saw the dark face of the priest peering over his battlements and hailed him:

"Hullo, Monsieur l'Abbé."

"All right, I'm coming down," answered the Abbé sourly.

He opened the little oak door set so snugly in his two-foot wall, and there he stood, three steps above his visitor. His manner was distinctly ungracious, but Peter was not to be rebuffed.

"Ah! Monsieur, you see I remember the so-kind invitation you gave me."

"*Quoi!* Invitation?"

"To hear you read some passages from your immortal work. Surely you have not forgotten?"

The Abbé had no memory of inviting this man to see him; however, he was too polite to say so. On the contrary:

"I am enchanted, Monsieur. It was you, I feared, who had forgotten. If you will do me the honour to enter."

Peter mounted the steps and the Abbé carefully closed the door. The garden looked cosy and generous. Fruit trees were trained against the wall and every inch of ground was cultivated. In summer it must be a gorgeous little place. Now, however, except for some cabbages, it was bare and bleak. Alongside the path were two heaps of apples, one rosy red, the other golden yellow.

"For cider," remarked Peter.

"Yes, I make my own. I am my own gardener, my own house-keeper, my own cook. My garden and my library are my greatest joys."

He ushered Peter into a pleasant, low-ceilinged room. It had a latticed bay-window, and was lined with book shelves. The Abbé indicated a friendly-looking armchair.

"English," he said. "They know how to make comfortable chairs, the English."

"But the French can teach them how to make comfortable beds. By the way, Monsieur l'Abbé, you have travelled, have you not?"

"A little. Why?"

Peter pointed to some Indian curios that adorned the walls.

"Ah yes. They come from Canada. You see, Monsieur, I am from Quebec. You are surprised to see a French Canadian settled here, but I love antiquity. I must live in a spot that has traditions. I have been here now for twenty years."

"Then you must have been young when you travelled."

"When I first joined the priesthood I went as a missionary into the Mackenzie River valley. I lived there with the Indians. That is why I have these curios. But now I can see you are impatient for me to read you some of my work. It is indeed good of you to take an interest in it, I will select some of the most picturesque chapters."

It was evident that, however shrewd the Abbé was in other matters, he was a monomaniac as far as his book was concerned. Page after page, chapter after chapter he read without looking up. If Peter stifled yawns the Abbé did not notice them. His voice droned on and on, and his listener began to feel drowsy. There was something fatally soporific about his periods. Once or twice Peter roused himself, but the Abbé read on. Peter fidgeted, changed his position, looked at his watch; still the Abbé read on. At five o'clock, the listener seized a pause between chapters to interject:

"Splendid, Monsieur l'Abbé, beautifully written. But really I must not impose on your kindness any further. It's been a great treat. However, you are getting tired."

"Not at all," said the Abbé eagerly. "Now, this is a good chapter. You'll like this one."

Again Peter settled down to listen. Was the man, he wondered, trying to punish him? Did he suspect that the visit was one of curiosity rather than of admiration? In any case the priest was determined not to let him off easily. Twice again Peter made a desperate effort to break away, but each time he was frustrated.

"Just one more passage," pleaded the Abbé. "What do you think of this description?"

Or—"You must give me your opinion of this peroration, Monsieur. I consider it one of my best."

It was six o'clock when, finally, the Abbé's voice failed.

"Great stuff!" said Peter vigorously. "It should make a hit."

"Ah! You are so sympathetic, Monsieur! It is a pleasure to read to you. Wait, here is an extract from the second volume. . . ."

"Ah no! Monsieur l'Abbé, really you must not. Your throat! It is actually hoarse. I beg you,—another time."

"Perhaps it is better," sighed the Abbé. "My enthusiasm runs away with me. But here is an old engraving I would like you to look at. It is a portrait of the historical Blue Beard himself."

Peter gazed with emotion at the lean and furrowed face of the greatest monster in history. He hated Gilles de Rais, not for the countless crimes he committed, but for the hours of boredom he, Peter, had passed. So he frowned savagely at the author of his misery and, as he did so, an amazing idea came to him.

"Curious," he muttered. "I wonder if there's anything in it."

But his idea was so extravagant, he scouted it. In all its absurdity he relegated it to the background of his consciousness.

"I must be going," he said with a cheerful air of regret.

Then, suddenly, he remembered the real object of his visit. He had almost forgotten the grey-green sweater. Now he saw the cuffs covering the hairy wrists of his host.

"The weather is growing much colder, is it not?" he observed in a tone elaborately casual.

"We must expect that."

"I am very sensitive to cold weather. My heart, you

know. Poor circulation. One must be prepared, well covered. I see you take good care of yourself in that respect. But don't you find that jersey you're wearing a little heavy for the season?"

"This?" The abbé protruded a brawny forearm clad in ribbed *tricot*. "No, I wear one of these from November to March."

"An excellent idea. I'd like to have one like that. If it is not indiscreet, might I ask where they are to be bought?"

"They are not to be bought, Monsieur. This was made for me."

"Ah! then, might I have one made for me too?" Peter persisted.

"I fear not. This was made by my old mother in Lachine. She knits me one every year and I receive it for Christmas. An excellent gift, is it not? On Christmas day I put off the old and put on the new. Then, I wrap up the worn one and take it to a friend of mine who wears it for another year. So that when I write to my old mother I tell her that her handiwork keeps two grateful men warm at the same moment."

"A nice idea. Your friend must appreciate it."

"He does."

Peter was at a loss. He felt he could not pursue this line any further. It would be idiotic as well as impertinent to ask the name of the friend. Well, he had at least found out something. Then he remembered another question, so looking idly at the curios, he remarked:

"You know the Indians well, do you not?"

"Some tribes fairly well," said the Abbé with a shrug. "The Beavers, the Yellow-Knives, the Dog-ribs. I travelled among them in the early days. Even among tribes more remote, more savage still."

"Did you take any interest in their folklore, their tribal ceremonies?"

"We had to combat some of their ancient customs, but—a priest has to shut his eyes to many things."

"Did you ever by any chance see the Dance of the Wolf?"

The Abbé started, his eyes narrowed. A pause. Then:

"The Dance of the Wolf! Why do you ask that? Have *you* ever seen it?"

"No, I believe it is only remembered by a few tribes, and by even the most barbarous of these it is rarely performed. It is very ancient, very horrible I'm told, sadistic in origin. I have seen men dance naked with ribbands sewn into their flesh, and I have seen others slash themselves with knives in their frenzy . . . but the Dance of the Wolf,—I don't think I want to see that."

"No, I have never seen it," said the Abbé quietly; "I have never even heard of it."

So Peter went away little wiser than he had entered, and somehow convinced that the Abbé was laughing at him.

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As he was getting into his car which he had left at Tremorac he encountered Monsieur de Marsac, who was waiting for the local train to take him to Rennes. De Marsac seemed more than pleased to see him and climbed into the car beside him.

"It's going to be stormy," said Peter. "The wind's rising. I must get back to my niece in case she's feeling nervous."

"She was quite all right when I left. I called to see you and she gave me tea."

Peter was thoughtful. He did not like de Marsac calling in his absence. Not that he distrusted the Frenchman, who had the strict ideas of the man of family towards all young women of his own class.

"Was there anything particular you wanted to see me about?"

De Marsac was suddenly grave. "There was," he admitted. "Something very important; but this hardly seems the time and the place to discuss it."

"Why not? No time like the present, and we are alone. If it's so important, we'd better discuss it now."

De Marsac seemed a little taken aback. "Perhaps I should not have mentioned it just yet," he began. "You see I am a man of very old family. In fact I have a hereditary title which I never use. As far as money goes I am poor, but I have much land which may some day be valuable. Besides this, I already stand high in my profession, and my ambition spurs me to greater heights. I mean to go in for politics. I am to be nominated for the Republican party at the next election, and will probably be elected. I may go far. I may even be President of the Council some day."

He paused. Peter wondered what he was leading up to. De Marsac leaned forward, laying his large hands almost affectionately on Peter's slim shoulders. Peter, who had a curious dislike to the touch of a fellow male which extended even to handshaking, shrank a little.

"Damn these demonstrative people!" he mumbled inwardly.

"You are asking yourself what I mean by all this," went on de Marsac. "I will be quite frank with you. I love your niece. I desire an alliance between our two families. In short, I beg the honour of her hand in marriage. But before saying a word to her I come to you as her guardian to ask your consent."

Peter was breathless with surprise. Leaning back on the cushioned seat, he fumbled nervously with his monocle. Sitting on the seat opposite, de Marsac leaned forward and fixed him with steady, level stare.

A long time seemed to pass. Peter squirmed mentally. The man facing him never shifted that compelling gaze.

There was something very masterful in his dark blue eyes, some strange magnetic force. Peter felt himself becoming dominated, and it annoyed him awfully. He would have liked to say: "No, damn you. I don't want her to marry. I want to keep her with me. Rotten selfishness I know, but . . ."

After all, when he came to explain everything to de Marsac, the man would probably back out. Explaining would be awkward, by Gad! However, no need to worry about that just yet.

"I see," he said finally. "I confess your proposal has taken me aback. Never dreamt of such a thing. Must consider it, my dear chap. We'll talk of it later on."

"Yes, but you see no obstacle? You have no objection to me as a future nephew-in-law?"

"On the contrary. But it must lie with the girl herself. You may be sure I will do nothing to interfere with her happiness."

"Then, you give me permission to approach her as a suitor?"

Confound the persistence of the chap! "Yes, as long as she is pleased."

"All right, my dear friend. I thank you. You've made me very, very happy."

The voice of de Marsac was resonant and his blue eyes gleamed exultantly. As he stood up, Peter was obliged to admit to himself that physically the Frenchman was a splendid fellow, straight, stalwart, commanding.

"Good-bye," he went on, gripping Peter's hand and shaking it.

"Good-bye," said Peter wincing. Then, sinking back on the cushions, he had a glimpse of his rueful reflexion in the mirror attached to the wind-screen.

"Well! I'll be blowed," he muttered.

CHAPTER TEN

THE TEMPEST

It was about eleven o'clock that same evening. Pascaline had gone to bed at ten; but Peter lingered. And while he kept company with the fire, Spirelli joined him.

So the two sat before the blaze. Peter, in evening dress, smoked a cigarette in a long tortoise-shell holder; while Spirelli, in a black serge suit, puffed a cigar. Behind them on the table stood a decanter.

"So this is your last night," said Peter.

"My last night."

"I'm awfully sorry. I wish you were staying instead of that muddle-headed Machard."

"Thanks . . . I wish I were too. I'll leave early in the morning."

"Will we never see you again?"

"Probably not. You'd better forget me."

"But what about your future?"

"I have my profession. I will rise in it. I may become chief of a department."

"Is mere money of any use to you?"

"Not at all."

A long silence. Peter studied Spirelli, his tall, wiry figure, the high brow now frowning a little, the deep-set eyes, the thin firm mouth. His gashed cheek was turned away, and Spirelli, seen from that side, was handsome in his stern pallor. Peter was drawn by something in the man. He really admired Spirelli and would be sorry to see the last of him.

"Isn't it blowing outside?" he observed. "A regular tempest."

"Yes. If any of the fishing boats of Auberon didn't get home, Heaven help them. There's a furious storm raging."

"Machard's getting a rotten night for his first watch."

"I suppose he's out there," said Spirelli indifferently.

"Yes. He makes up in conscientiousness what he lacks in perspicacity. He's cowering somewhere in the bushes behind the house, wrapped in a long coastguard's cape."

"I hope he makes a capture. It's a good night for evil deeds. Listen to that wind."

Peter could hear it roaring in the trees, howling round the roof, shrieking past the tall chimneys, rattling every window in the house.

"I'm glad I'm not in the place of Marchard," he remarked. "One appreciates a snug fireside on such a night. Did I tell you I saw the Père Grégoire?"

Spirelli nodded absently.

"Curious old fellow. He skimmed the cream of his book for me. You know, he was a great beggar, that Gilles de Rais."

Spirelli stifled a yawn.

"Oh, I say, about that grey-green sweater. It's his old lady in Quebec who knits them for him once a year. When the last one's worn he gives it to a friend. I didn't have the nerve to ask who the friend was, though."

"That's all right," said Spirelli absently. "I know who the friend is."

"You do. Since when?"

"Since this afternoon. . . . Mon Dieu! How that wind raves! It gives me the shivers. I hate wind. It's near midnight. I think I'll go to bed."

The storm seemed indeed to be reaching a climax. The wind was coming in quick gusts,—short-arm jabs of wind, each more savage than the one before. Peter could imagine the trees writhing in the blackness, and the crash of wrecked limbs.

"It's dangerous for that poor devil Machard," he reflected. "Perhaps we'd better have him in."

He wanted to ask Spirelli the name of the Abbé Grégoire's

friend, but for some reason Spirelli didn't seem keen to tell him. Peter felt rather hurt. However the detective knew his own business best. After all, was he not concealing something himself? . . . Gad! that wind! Those fierce jolts that jarred the whole house! It seemed to have the force of a solid body, the impact of a battering ram.

"What a gale," he thought. He could imagine the sea. . . . The tide must be at the full. There would be rearing humps and yawning hollows, a thundering crash and streaming rocks. Round the fierce fangs that sentinelled the coast, there would be a dance of sheeted devils, high and howling, like flagellants lashing themselves to fiercer fury. On the ridges the thin grass would be cringing, each pine bent to a bow. The sea would be churned like a snow-field under the tenebrous night. All this he pictured vividly, comfortably drawing nearer to the fire.

Spirelli was silent, his eyes sombrely fixed on the flame. Yet, to Peter he seemed tense, nervous, as if he expected something to happen. No wonder. He himself felt quite keyed up. This wild stallion of a wind neighing shrilly over the roof, trampling on the tree-tops, screaming its challenge from the harsh savannahs of the sea. Again he thought of Machard keeping his solitary vigil somewhere in the midst of that insensate fury. Then, another thought came to him and he turned to Spirelli.

"Have you ever heard of the Wolf Dance?" he queried suddenly.

Spirelli seemed to rouse from his brooding mood. His eyes, faintly ironical, questioned Peter.

"What do you know of the Wolf Dance?"

"Not much. I wondered if you could tell me something."

"It's a dance peculiar to the Indians of the sub-Arctic, though variations of it may be seen in many parts of the world. Forms of it can be traced back to remotest antiquity. In fact it seems to hint at some tenebrous affinity between man and beast—animal worship perhaps, some mys-

terious recognition of that brutish womb from which we are all sprung. Man is linked to the Beast, the Beast to Man. Sometimes, perhaps, the borderland is passed, and Man becomes Animal, or Animal Man. It's the old idea of the werewolf, the wendigo, the vampire. *That* may be the origin of the Wolf Dance . . . or again it may not."

Spirelli rose and stood with his back to the fire. For the moment he seemed to have shaken off his drowsiness.

"Have a fresh cigar," said Peter. "Have you any other explanation of it?"

Spirelli lit his cigar thoughtfully.

"I have. It lies in that strange, sinister passion which every now and then reveals itself in some shape and form, and then shrinks back into the murk and mystery from which it arose. We find it in the records of pathology. It crops up sordidly in the courts of crime."

"You mean . . . ?"

"What is known as Sadism,—a profound, rather horrible study. It manifests itself in sex perversion, in murder with rape, in that queer vice known to history as flagellism. Perhaps even in extreme asceticism, the ecstasy of the martyr, there is a touch of it. Who can tell. The mysteries of our natures are so abysmal. We none of us begin to know ourselves. From the Beast we sprung, and deep in the secret jungles of our souls, the Beast still cowers . . . Ugh! that wind! I seem to have a hereditary horror of wind."

"As they listened, its violence seemed to be greater than ever. It came in brutal gusts like the jabs of a titanic fist. The window shutters were being shaken as by a savage hand. It was as if the storm in impotent rage was striving to get in at them.

"I've heard of raw-beef Sadism," said Peter.

"That is one of its most horrible and degraded forms. Some say that the cure for it is the venom of the rattlesnake. I don't know. It is not well, I think, to delve too deeply into these things."

He seemed as if he would willingly change the subject, but Peter persisted.

"Would you not consider the Wolf Dance a form of raw-beef Sadism?"

Spirelli regarded him keenly. "A form, perhaps. You seem to be fascinated with the idea of the Wolf Dance. I didn't want to talk of it, it is so horrible; but . . . I have seen the Wolf Dance."

"When? Where?"

"Years ago in Northern British Columbia. Listen, I will try to recall it.

Spirelli's eyes had a far-away look. Standing there with his back to the fire, the scarred side of his face was now turned to Peter, and his pallor was accentuated. He began:

"I see a vast shed of cedar slabs, its roof open to the stars. Around it crowd the dizzy pines in serried black battalions. Above it are mountains majestic, crested by eternal snow and gashed by glaciers glinting under the moon.

"There are two mighty fires in the middle of the huge shed, fires that light it to its remotest corners. Their smoke, rising to a hole in the roof, blots out the stars. Round the fires are squatted hundreds of Indians, whose flat brown faces, lit up vividly, reveal the wild eagerness of their eyes. In the first rank squat the braves, those who have proved their prowess in war and the chase. They sing with hoarse voices a barbaric chant, beating time with their clubs on the planks of cedar before them. Behind, in rising ranks to the smoke-grimed walls, crowd women and children. Their faces, too, are all alight with the same emotion, and at the signal passionately they join in the singing. . . .

"And now there goes up a great roar, a surge of exultant song. A dancer has leapt into the space between the two fires. He is very old, a medicine man. He totters on the verge of senility, and his skinny body is nearly naked. But for the moment the dance seems to inspire him with the

strength, the agility of youth. Sweat glistens and drops down his thin ribs; his arms wave in wild gestures, his body moves in queer jerks. A gleam transforms his glazed eyes, and from his cracked lips begins to run a stream of foam. Wilder grow his gestures, higher his jerky leaps. His lungs are panting painfully, and his chin is now covered with a spume that slavers over his chest. The audience shriek with delight; the singers quicken their time; the old man responds to the passionate goad of their song. His antics grow more fantastic while, from his writhing lips, bubbles that yellow drool. But it is a final effort. He falls back exhausted, and is carried away by two stalwart tribesmen. . . .

“A woman now springs up. From my place I have been watching her curiously. She has been moaning, swaying from side to side, only the whites of her eyes showing. Now she begins to dance, twisting her body in strange contortions, circling round the fires swift as a shadow, yet with scarcely any movement of her feet. Her hands are upraised, her body vibrates in time to the song, her eyes are closed. I thrill with a fear lest she fall into one of the fires; yet I believe that very fear gives the dance its grim zest. The savage audience gape and gasp each time she skims so close to the flame. But no, she just saves herself by a finger-span; and every now and then she utters a piercing cry that seems to stir the singers to frenzy. They beat more lustily than ever and, as their voices take fresh fervour, the audience becomes more and more exultant. The air is choking with the smell of stale fish and the sweat of filthy skins. Nearly every face is hideous with scrofula, nearly every body tainted with disease. A beastly, a degraded race! I want to get away, but the fascination of the dance holds me. I am glad, however, when suddenly the woman collapses on the floor, writhing in an epileptic fit. . . .

“The next to dance is a young ‘buck.’ He is making his *début*. For weeks he has been alone in the bush, preparing himself for his great hour. He has lived on blue-berries,

and the roots of the pea-vine, so that he is ghastly and emaciated. He has stood for hours in water icy-cold and lashed himself with switches of the willow till he bleeds. Now the flesh is subdued, the spirit triumphant. He flames to ecstasy as he leaps forward with the gesture of a warrior. He bounds high in the air whirling a spear with which he slays imaginary foes. He charges, spins round like a top, utters fierce cries. Now bracing himself, with a short run, he leaps clear over the fire. The flames lick him hungrily, but he lands in safety. Three times he does this amid the ever increasing excitement. A slip and he would fall into the heart of the flame. How they thrill at the horrid thought! Eyes are shining with joy, throats hoarse with shouting. Then he, too, with a final shout, makes his exit. . . .

“The next dance is more of a humorous interlude. The Indians dressed in skins go through the most grotesque contortions. It is a lewd dance, depicting a love-affair between two animals. In its horrible obscenity it goes beyond all bounds, yet women and children laugh without stint. Then a great hush falls on the throng, a stillness that seems to me thrilled with expectancy, heavy with suspense. . . .

“Once more the singers begin their barbaric chant, and little by little the audience join in. Again and again they repeat the same refrain, with growing ardour. It is as if they are mocking someone. Louder and louder is the song; wilder and wilder the tattoo of the beating clubs. In the fetid air their faces ooze with sweat, and their eyes, rimmed with sores, shine with some emotion I cannot quite define. Ecstatic fear perhaps best expresses it. But they are now lashed to pure frenzy and their wild song seems to go up like an appeal, calling for I know not what. Then, like a flashing blade severing the sound, there is a profound silence. . . .

“How can I describe that silence! It is as if all hold breath and wait. They are tense, petrified. For a long moment that thrilling silence is sustained. . . . I remember

looking up at the great opening in the roof, seeing stars and a velvet sky. I think of the trackless forest and the ageless snow on the mountain tops. All the loneliness of the primitive Wild cries to me. Oh, for a breath of that ice-pure air! . . .

“Then, suddenly I stiffen and a curious thrill seems to run up my spine. For, as we wait and listen . . . hark! a call comes out of the night, a cry pierces the silence. It is high, clear, melodious. There is something familiar about it, something primal, something absolute. It seems to voice the very spirit of the Wild. I can sense the anxiety, the terror of those about me. A child clutches its mother, with face turned to her breast. A girl seems about to faint. Again that cry, but . . . it is nearer now. It is coming—the creature they have evoked. Once more that clear call. . . . Ah! now I know it. It is the howl of the questing wolf, and behold! exultant, demoniac, it is at the very door. . . .

“All at once the crowd by the entrance presses back frantically. Women hide their eyes, cover their lips to choke back their screams. They give way, make a clear passage. And by this passage the Beast-Man makes his entry. . . .

“Except for the skin of a wolf he is naked and on his head is bound the head of a wolf. His body is cut and torn, and glistens wet with fresh blood. It is of a livid white, like the inside of a newly peeled hide. His nails are like talons; his teeth, pointed like the fangs of an animal, are bared in a wolfish snarl. Even the glare of his eyes is ferine in its ferocity. The Beast-Man! I feel my flesh crawl and my hair prick at the roots. Horror and loathing convulse me. I have a sense of nausea, yet I watch, I watch. . . .

“The strange thing pauses a moment, as if dazzled by the sudden glare. Then, uttering a snarling cry, it rushes in. Twice it runs round the fires with all the form of a man but the wild supple grace of a wolf. Its teeth are snapping, its nostrils flared. Once, twice, it slides to a standstill, to snarl and glare at the nearest of the throng. How they blench,

shudder back! But on it goes, and for the third time makes the circuit of the fires. Then . . . then it halts, cowers, makes a sudden rush . . .

"How well I remember that moment! There is no screaming. Everyone seems too paralysed to utter a sound. It is as if all take their breath in one great gasp and hold it. My hand steals to the revolver at my hip. . . .

"And this is what I see. . . . I see it plainly for the Thing is so near to me. I have spoken of the child that hid its head on its mother's breast. Well, the Creature seizes the child, tears it from her arms, and, bending down . . . Ugh! it buries its teeth in the flesh of the naked leg and tears savagely. . . .

"Even now I am sick to think of it. Would I had shot the brute, even if it had cost me my life! That is one of my bitterest regrets. Why did I not draw the gun I clutched and kill the thing? But no! Fear gripped me too. Those others, Children of the Wolf, would have torn me limb from limb. So I hesitated, and even as I faltered the Beast was gone.

"Then the silence was broken,—aye, broken by an infant's cry of agony. *Dieu!* it still rings in my ears. With a long moan the mother had fallen to the ground. All was confusion. Children screamed and women wept. The Wolf-Man was gone, gone with his tribute. The spell was broken, but the horror of the scene still numbed me. Then, with an oath, I dashed in pursuit. Alas! The moonlit mountains mocked me, and from the heart of the dark forest came screams and screams and . . . silence. . . ."

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Peter gave a sigh of relief as Spirelli finished.

"You told that well," he said. "You almost made me see it all."

"It is as fresh in my mind as if it happened yesterday. But I never thought to tell it to anyone. I wanted to forget

it. And now you've brought it back. Why did you make me tell you that?"

"Because," said Peter, "I felt I must know. Don't you see? It has a bearing on all this, these lacerating wounds we found on the bodies, on the leg, on the neck, like the gnawing and tearing of fangs. It was unthinkable. We daren't even suggest it to ourselves. But now . . ."

"I know," said Spirelli grimly. "I, too, have thought of all that. That was the strange feature of the case that made me keen to take it up. Whoever killed those men is—*an eater of living human flesh.*"

The two men stared into one another's eyes.

"Who can it be?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you," said Peter in a hushed voice. "This afternoon I found out something. The Abbé Grégoire has been up there. He has seen those things. He denies it but I know he lies. His library is full of books on Masochism; and he is crazy on the subject of Gilles de Rais, that Prince of Sadists. Well . . ."

Spirelli took from his pocket the wisp of torn wool.

"Does this look as if it came from an old garment or a new one?" he asked.

Peter examined it closely. "An old one, I should say. It seems faded by the sun."

"I think so too. That makes it more difficult. Good God! What's that?"

The two men swung round. The window shutters that had been rattling as if shaken by a furious hand now swung open with a crash.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHAT THE LIGHTNING REVEALED

There was a long pause in which they stared blankly at the window.

"It's only the wind," said Peter a little shakily. "We're both a bit nervous to-night. The catch on the shutters is no good. The rattling must have loosened it. Then the wind caught it and banged it open."

"It will bang all night if we don't fix it securely," said Spirelli. "I'm going to open the window. Please put the lamp out of the way, so that the gust that enters won't catch it."

Peter removed the lamp to the buffet and joined Spirelli. When unbolted, the big window opened inward, as if pushed by a savage force, and a draught went roaring up the chimney. The two men stared out. The gale was now blowing more steadily, but with little lulls of calm.

"An evil night," said Spirelli. "Much mischief will be done before the break of day."

As he went on to the terrace, the wind was so strong he had to lean against it. He caught the broad, high shutter, and tried to swing it round, but the wind tore it from his fingers and slammed it back again.

"Wait a minute. There will be a lull," said Peter. "Now for it. . . . *Ouch!*"

Involuntarily he started back, for the sooty night was lit by a fulvous glare. In a weird mauve light they could see each other's face, see the long stretch of the terrace, see the trees lashing frantically beyond. It was brilliant sheet lightning, a flutter of ghastly revealment; then that vast smother of darkness again.

"Come," said Spirelli a little impatiently. "Aid me, and between us we will close this shutter."

The two men gripped it and were going to exert their force, when, all at once, the wind failed, leaving a vacuum of silence. It was almost startling.

"A lull," cried Peter. "Now's the time. Come on" Then he stopped. "What's that?" he gasped.

In the light from the window the two men looked blankly at each other. Peter's eyes were starting and a great tremor

ran over him. "Did you hear it?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes," said Spirelli almost in a whisper. "Listen. There it is again."

Then, for the second time in that weird and sudden hush, they heard a cry go up, a cry in the night. It was high, clear, almost musical. For a moment it soared in the stillness, then the wind swooped down and drowned it.

"The wolf-cry," said Peter in a choking voice. "And here . . . *here*." Then he added almost in a whisper. "And Machard out there . . . Machard."

But Spirelli was not listening. The man seemed to be galvanized into sudden action. There was a wild flash to his eyes, a grim set to his lips. His voice grated harshly.

"Quick! There's no time to lose. There's danger out there. Terrible danger. My big torch is on the mantelpiece. Please get it."

He sped along the terrace, feeling in his hip pocket as he ran, and followed by Peter with the torch. As they rounded the end of the house, the wind caught them so viciously it seemed as if it would sweep them off their feet. When they reached the back of the building the darkness seemed to engulf them, and in it the torch was a mere pinhole of light. The black night blotted them out from each other, and they had to shout to make their voices heard. They paused, rather at a loss. In this infernal dark, with that hell's racket in their ears, what could they do? But as they faltered, another of those ghastly flares lit up all about them.

Peter gripped Spirelli fiercely by the arm. Not a dozen paces away he had seen them,—*two men*. Plainly he had distinguished them. He could not doubt his eyes. They were over there by the bushes. One lay on the ground and the other crouched over him.

"Look! there they are," he almost hissed, playing his light on them. "Come on."

But Spirelli was already gone. He darted straight at the crouching figure that turned and ran.

With a heart leap of fear, Peter sprang to the side of the fallen man. He turned him over, letting the little circle of light fall on his face. It was as he dreaded—Machard.

The Inspector's head was crushed and lay in a pool of blood. His crêpe-like moustache was sopping it up. His eyes stared glassily at the gleam of the torch. Dead!

But all at once he heard Spirelli crying to him. "Help! Over here. Quick! Quick!"

Spirelli was down in the bushes some twenty yards away, struggling for his life. The fugitive, whoever he was, was fighting like a demon. He had his pursuer on the ground, and with one hand he held Spirelli's wrist so that the detective could not use his pistol. With the other he gripped the Italian by the throat. It was going hard with Spirelli. He had overtaken his man and closed with him; but the fellow was like a tiger, and in the fierce struggle the detective went down.

Now it lay with Peter, and Peter did not fail. As Spirelli choked and gasped, he heard Peter plunging through the bushes to his aid. His assailant heard too and turned. But in that instant Peter brought the electric torch smashing down on the man's head. Spirelli felt the grip at his throat relax and a heavy weight fall on him. He wriggled from under.

"Good!" he cried exultantly. "We've got him at last. Hold him there."

However, there was no need to hold the man. He sprawled limply on the ground. Peter's blow had knocked him senseless. Twisting his hands behind him, Spirelli snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"We've caught him, caught him in the act," he cried exultantly. "The arch-criminal. Let's see who he is, at last, at last!"

But Peter's torch was broken and would help them none. There at their feet lay the unknown man and the darkness was blacker than ever. Then, once more, that vivid light-

ning came to their aid. It flared in their faces, like a flashlight pistol. It lit up with gruesome distinctness the features of the fallen man.

“Good God!” gasped Peter.

For the face he saw was that of the old fisherman, Ragon.

END OF BOOK FOUR

BOOK FIVE

THE TRIAL

CHAPTER ONE

PETER HAS A DOUBT

"So they'll be trying old Ragon on Friday," said Peter. "I suppose he hasn't got the ghost of a chance."

"Why should he?" answered Spirelli. "Wasn't he caught in the act, his hands red with the blood of his victim?"

"And we will help to send him to the guillotine."

"Our testimony will, no doubt, seal his fate."

"I don't like it," said Peter miserably. "I don't like to be the one to hurt anyone. Couldn't I hire the greatest lawyer in France to defend him?"

"What's the good? You'll be trying to save him on one hand and trying to condemn him on the other."

"I'd never go into the box against the poor man if I could avoid it. Time and again I've been on the point of clearing out. Once let me get to Switzerland or Italy, they can summon me till they're purple in the face; I'll tell them all to go to the devil."

"But you are going to do what is obviously your duty."

"What is my duty?"

"To help to rid the world of a dangerous criminal."

"Do you really believe that? Why, the poor man's 'daft.' He's had such a lot of trouble it's turned his brain. You don't believe he's responsible, do you? He may have killed Machard—I'll not be denying that; but you don't think he's responsible for the whole show, do you?"

"Since we caught him the nocturnal visitations have ceased," pointed out Spirelli. "We sleep in absolute security. The creature of the night has given no further sign."

"Still, there's an awful lot to be explained," sighed Peter.

"Maybe the laddie's lying low. He's waiting till they chop off the head of that poor devil, then he'll bob up again. Oh, I'm not satisfied. And you know *you're* not satisfied, Spirelli. You're saying nothing, but you're thinking a whole lot."

"Why complicate things? We got our man red-handed, didn't we? Everything points to him being the author of the whole series of crimes."

"And you really believe the poor creature capable of all that? Getting into the house, the wolf business, so on? Well then, he's certainly a deep one."

"Why not? Since his capture he's maintained absolute silence. Not a word of defence or explanation. He shuts his mouth like an oyster and glares at them with those sharky eyes."

"May be he's too proud to defend himself, and doesn't care if they *do* chop off his bally head."

"In that case they won't disappoint him. They'll chop it off all right. Public sentiment's dead against him. De Marsac will judge him, and I think he once expressed himself strongly to you on the matter. The trial won't go over two days. It's a foregone conclusion."

"Has anything been found out about the death of his daughter?"

"Some think he was responsible for that too. There was a violent scene between them, and she was never seen again."

"And the Chinaman?"

"There's no case against him. He explained in writing that he gave the pin to the girl. She came to the house every day to sell fish and he liked her. It was an innocent gift."

"It's funny nothing's ever been heard of Doctor Chavas."

"Some think he's dead and that old Ragon is responsible for that too. A veritable monster, the papers pictured him. They've dug up all his unsavoury past—a verdict of manslaughter, a term in Guyane. All of which puts him in

a bad light. Why, if the man was absolutely innocent and we two knew that he was innocent, not all our efforts to save him would avail."

"I don't like to think that," said Peter. "Suppose he *is* innocent—suppose he didn't even kill Machard? Suppose there's a greater monster, a super-criminal behind all this? Suppose we're helping, you and I, to send an innocent man to the scaffold? I tell you, Spirelli, I'm worried. Sometimes I wish we *would* have another night-alarm. Sometimes I think that's why I'm staying on here. You've not found out anything new, have you?"

"Nothing very important."

"But you're still working on the case?"

"I have orders to remain here till after the trial."

"Ah well, I hope something will happen before that," said Peter with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWO

PASCALINE HAS A PROBLEM

Pascaline was feeling as perfectly happy as any reasonable being had any right to feel; and so she sought to savour her happiness by stealing off and sitting on the sand.

After the arrest of Ragon, intoxicated by a new sense of security, they had remained at Castel Blanc. The old house was spacious and airy; the audacious verdure gave them a sense of nature: the quiet lay on their souls like balm. A good place to live in like a mollusc, which was precisely what Peter wanted.

So, as the weeks passed and nothing happened to mar their serenity, they developed an almost mechanical precision, doing the same things in the same way day after day. Life resolved itself into a pattern, and in its tranquil monot-

ony they found a real peace. Often they did not know which day of the week it was.

As she squatted on the sand and let it run through her fingers, she was thinking of all this. She would be quite contented with that kind of a life,—embroidering, knitting, reading, dreaming. Somehow the days passed only too swiftly. Then there were walks on the sands and drives in the car. Peter was so much better and that, perhaps, accounted for her happiness. His heart attacks had been rare during the winter, and never bad ones. In every case they had been due to excess of some kind: cigarettes for instance. She could not get him to smoke in moderation. Exercise too. He *would* overdo it. It was difficult for him to take life lazily. He would leap upstairs like a lad and do physical jerks on the lawn. Afterwards he was astonished because his heart became acrobatic and wouldn't let him sleep.

"You're quite right," he would reply to her chiding. "But it's so hard to saunter through life. I'll try, though. Watch me do the cardiac crawl."

A spell of cold weather brought hosts of ducks and tempted him to shoot. He spent icy hours in a shelter on the point of the rock, and returned chilled and exhausted. Yet he would never take brandy to restore him. He was as intemperate in abstinence as he had been in indulgence. An "exaggerationist" she called him; more than half a hypochondriac. Well, he was always gentle with her, tender, charming. More and more every day she realized her affection for him.

There was Spirelli too. From time to time he had come to see Peter on business. His conduct had been reserved, respectful, all that could be desired. Indeed, so politely had he behaved, she had been slightly piqued. Still, she had developed a tolerance for him. If he had not been her husband, perhaps she could have come to like him dangerously well. As for the divorce proceedings, they had already been

begun, and in a few months more she would be free to marry again.

That was rather a nuisance. She supposed she *must* marry again. One must marry to have children. Why couldn't women have all the children they wanted without the worry of a husband? Or, if one could have a husband like Peter. . . . But Peter wouldn't marry her. Refused absolutely. She had asked him several times, but he only got peevish.

"I'm going to adopt you as my daughter," he told her. "but I'll be hanged if I make myself your husband."

He had been positively cross about it; though she believed he had made a will leaving her a terrifying lot of money. She didn't want his money, however, she wanted Peter.

Then there was de Marsac. Ah! that was a problem. As she thought of him she became very thoughtful indeed. Hector de Marsac was not easily disposed of. A man to be reckoned with. She felt the force of him. Peter felt it too. Peter funk'd him. De Marsac was not to be put off, as far as she was concerned. For three months back he had been paying her the most assiduous attention. True, he had never attempted to make love to her, but that was because he was playing the game according to the rules. His manner had been that of respectful adoration. But she felt that he felt he could have her when he wanted her.

De Marsac troubled her. Without doubt, physically and mentally, he was a splendid man. Almost a semi-superman. But what woman would want to marry even a semi-superman? She realized she was not on the same plane as de Marsac. True, as to family she might be his equal. Was not her mother a Hungarian countess; and had not Peter told her her father was descended from the kings of Ireland? Besides, according to him, she would be an heir-ess. And she had a lily-like beauty, a lithe loveliness. But

with all that she felt she was not a match for de Marsac.

For one thing, he was ruthlessly ambitious. He would go far, be at least a Minister of State. Fancy her the wife of a high diplomat! The very prospect appalled her.

Yes, there was something terribly dominating about the man. There were moments when a magnetic power seemed to go out from him and she was afraid. Afraid, yet fascinated. She admitted his charm, his sparkling cleverness, his knowledge of the world. There were times when she could almost have loved him, and when he was as sincere and artless as a boy; but that passed quickly, and the egotism, the ambition flared out again. He was de Marsac, master of men, calm, conquering.

"If he should ask me to marry him, what shall I say—yes or no?" she demanded of herself. "Peter won't help me. I must make my own decision, he says. Oh! I hope he won't ask me, but I'm afraid he will. Dear me! I don't see any way out of it. I fear it will have to be 'yes'."

So she sighed and, hearing what seemed to be a mocking echo of her sigh, she looked up.

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Talk of the devil—or anyone else—sure enough, it was the man she was thinking of.

He was standing on the dyke looking down on her. His two liver-and-white spaniels were running in circles with their noses to the ground, and his gun lay in the hollow of his arm. De Marsac, the sportsman, was an upstanding figure of a man. He looked his best in shooting tweeds; and now he radiated health and high spirits. With a gleam of white teeth and a dancing light in his eyes he hurried to her side.

"Please don't get up. How lucky I am to find you here. I was just thinking of you. Maybe my thoughts led me to you. What do you think?"

She was thinking that maybe her thoughts of him had

something to do with it, but for the world she would not have let him know. Laughingly she replied:

“Your thoughts might have led you to someone worthier.”

He kissed her hand. “I know of none. My thoughts, like worshippers, lead me to the shrine. And here I kneel.”

She was like Peter, profoundly unsentimental; and she distrusted fancy phrases.

“Please don’t kneel. You’ll spoil the shape of those beautiful new knickerbockers.”

“These,” he said with a certain naïve vanity, “are the famous English plus-fours. Awfully ugly, but all the rage. You know how we ape the English. However, I was only speaking figuratively. I’ll sit, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, do. This is a surprise. When did you arrive?”

“This morning, from Paris. I have to be in Rennes for the opening of the Ragon case on Friday, and I thought I’d get in a day’s shooting. Also . . .” He bent forward, looking gravely into her eyes,—“I thought I might see you.”

She avoided his gaze. “Ah yes, you’re going to judge that poor man.”

“Why ‘poor man’?”

“Uncle Peter and I don’t believe he’s guilty; at least, not of all those crimes.”

“One is enough. But why not?”

“Well, he’s not deep enough. He’s only an ignorant, half-witted man.”

“How do we know how deep he is? Remember he’s an ex-convict. For all we know he may have been a pirate and spilled buckets of blood.”

“I don’t believe it. I wish you could let him off easily.”

“I will have no choice in the matter. Duty comes before everything. I would condemn a brother if he was found guilty.”

She sighed. “Then you’ll condemn poor Ragon, no doubt to death.”

"If he is found guilty, not all the wealth and power of France will save him from my judgment."

"What a stern man you are. I'm afraid of you."

"You really mustn't be," he laughed. "That's only my professional side. There are others. See me playing with my dogs; hear me talking of books and music; watch me romping with children, then you'll know the different sort of chap I am."

"Are you really fond of children?"

"Foolishly. And you?"

"No. I loathe them."

He looked at her rather glumly. "Then we won't have any."

She stared, suddenly wrathful. "'We.' What do you mean?"

"I don't mean what you mean," he laughed.

"What do I mean?"

"*Ma foi!* I don't know. . . . Our not having children needn't imply that we have any personal interest in each other's lack of them. But please don't get cross over so foolish a matter, I didn't come down here to fight with you, I came down here to see you."

"I thought you came down to shoot ducks."

"Ostensibly. But if you hadn't been here, not all the ducks in Finistère could have tempted me."

"Well, you see me now."

"I do. . . ."

She felt that his eyes were on her approvingly. She wore a simple dress of blue linen that showed to advantage her slim, straight figure. From its low lace collar rose the soft curve of her throat. Her hair, gleaming in jetty coils, contrasted with the pearly whiteness of her skin; her features had a wistful delicacy, her lips that expression of sweetness that always reminded him of a child.

". . . And it was worth while," he went on exultantly.

"It would be worth while to cross the world to see you—aye, for a single moment."

"Hyperbole!"

"Hyperbole is the language of love, and . . . I love you."

A little breathlessly she rose to her feet. If ever he got his arms round her, she felt she would be lost.

"I must be going. It's later than I thought. Uncle Peter will be worrying about me."

There was a faint amusement in his eyes. He knew his power. She was like a little fluttering bird in his hands. Whenever he wished, she would be his. So he walked with her to the foot of the steps, that calm conquering look in his eyes. She climbed three steps, then gave him her hand. Again he kissed her fingers.

"I'm going away happy, now I've seen you."

"Won't you come to tea?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I have much to do."

"Then, good-bye."

But he held her hand. Gently he was drawing her down to him, step by step.

"A moment. Listen. I came here this morning with the intention of begging you to marry me. I can't go away without an answer. Mademoiselle, as a man of family and position, I ask you, will you do me the honour to be my wife?"

It had come, the dreaded moment. She was close to him. There was dignity in his bearing, gentleness in his voice, tender appeal in his eyes. A wonderful man, she thought. It would be best to accept him. So she opened her lips to say "yes." . . . "No," she said.

Strange! She had really intended to say yes, and here she had faltered out a "no." Also she had snatched her hand away and was up the stairs again.

He was looking profoundly amazed. His eyes were troubled now.

"You mean . . . you won't?"

"I mean I won't marry you. Please don't press me, Monsieur de Marsac. I know it's a great honour, but I don't want to marry. I want to stay with Uncle Peter. I'll never leave him as long as he wants me."

"But supposing he wished you to marry me."

"I'll do anything Uncle Peter wishes."

The possessive look returned to his face. "All right. I'll have a talk with your uncle. We'll arrange all that. The last word isn't said."

He watched her go up the steps, then, whistling to his dogs, he strode away.

CHAPTER THREE

DE MARSAC RECEIVES A SHOCK

On her return to the house, she found Peter impatiently awaiting her.

"Here you are, my child. Ah! it seems as if I can't get along without you, even for an hour."

"What do you want now, Uncle Peter?"

"My nails trimmed. It's a week since you did them."

He was vain of his hands which were small and well-shaped. He insisted on them being immaculately groomed, and she delighted to play the manicurist. So now he perched on one arm of the big armchair, while she sat in it and held his hand. He took a childish pleasure in the operation, watching the dainty movements of her slim fingers, or admiring the creamy whiteness of the nape of her neck as it curved under the low collar. She was bending closely over his hand when she remarked:

"I've just had an offer of marriage."

"What?" Peter was startled. Then: "Who?"

"From Monsieur de Marsac."

"Is he here?"

"Yes. I met him on the beach."

Peter silently digested her announcement. When he spoke his voice sounded queer.

"I was expecting it. I wonder he didn't say anything before. Did you know he was coming?"

"No. Our meeting was quite accidental."

Peter sighed. "I suppose it had to be. Well, I hope he'll always be good to you. In any case, I've settled my money on you, so that you only have the life interest, and no one can draw it but yourself. He came to me, asking about a *dot*. I told him: no damned *dot* for him or anyone else. If a man doesn't consider himself lucky enough to get you for your own sake, he can go to the devil. The French make me sick with their *dot* business. If he'd been a man of my own size and age, I'd have given him a dot on the *derrière* with the toe of my boot."

"Then, he would probably have challenged you to a duel."

"That would be all right. My heart won't let me fight with fists any more, but I'm a peach with a pistol."

Peter felt resentful, even vindictive. De Marsac was robbing him of something he prized.

"When does he want you to marry him?"

"I don't know. You see I . . . I refused him."

"You refused de Marsac!"

"Why not. . . . Keep your hand steady, please. You didn't think I would leave you, did you? You can't get rid of me so easily as all that. If you won't marry me yourself, no one else will."

Peter was speechless. She went on sweetly:

"He's coming to see you, to try and persuade you. Now, don't let him dominate you. That's what I don't like about him, the way he dominates one. Show him you have a will of your own."

"Leave it to me," said Peter grimly. "I'll handle him."

De Marsac called that afternoon. It was raining, so Peter received him in the dining room. De Marsac's voice was cheerfully resonant, his manner charmingly cordial. At once Peter felt the overpowering personality of the man.

After a little preliminary politeness, de Marsac came to the point.

"I met your niece on the beach this morning. Perhaps she told you."

"Yes," with a solemn nod.

"With your permission, I asked her to marry me."

"Yes."

"And she refused."

"I know."

"Of course, I cannot accept that seriously. Young girls don't know their own minds. In France, at least, they are always guided by their parents and guardians. I like her all the better for refusing me so gracefully, but that is only the beginning. You have nothing against me as a husband for your niece, have you?"

"Nothing."

"From a worldly point of view, am I a desirable match?"

"Quite."

"Well, I want to marry her. The more she resists, the more I desire her. I never accept defeat. Now I ask you to bring your influence to bear on her. She will do anything for you. And, as you are satisfied, you will not hesitate. Trust me with her, my dear fellow. I will make her happy."

His appeal was so simple and sincere that Peter was moved.

"I know," went on de Marsac, "that nationality enters into these things. Perhaps you do not believe in mixed marriages. You think an English girl can never be happy with a Frenchman. In most cases, no. But your niece has a temperament curiously French, while I myself am strangely

English in my sympathies. Racial differences really blend in us. I am convinced we are ideally suited to each other."

Peter smoked glumly, never saying a word. Almost with affection, de Marsac laid a hand on his shoulder, a thing Peter cordially detested.

"Come on, old man," he said persuasively. "You see, it's a good thing for all of us. You'll put in your best word for me, won't you?"

"I don't know," said Peter obstinately. "We believe in girls settling these things for themselves. Pascaline must decide."

De Marsac looked at him with half-humorous resignation.

"Ah! You Englishmen! Well, if you won't plead my cause, at least you'll endorse it."

Peter felt he could not stand out against the man. Those deep blue eyes were searching him, sapping his will. It irritated him.

"My niece," he said, "must be left to follow her own instincts. I won't bias her in any way."

"Ah! I see I must fight my battle without your aid. But remember I will never give her up till she is actually married to another man."

"That's it," said Peter deliberately. "She *is* actually married to another man."

There! It was out. Solemn as an owl, Peter stared at de Marsac, and de Marsac stared back at Peter.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she has already a perfectly sound husband. I should have told you this before, but it is a very private, very delicate matter. We did not want it to be known."

"You mean," said de Marsac in an ominous tone, "that you have allowed me to go on paying court to a girl who was already married."

"Awfully sorry. The explanation was so damned awkward. And I never thought things would come to a head."

De Marsac's brow was very dark. "You surely gave me

credit for being in earnest. You should have been frank with me."

"I admit it. It was rotten of me."

"Then I understand that your niece has contracted a secret marriage."

"Unfortunately."

"And why isn't she living with her husband?"

"She doesn't love him."

"Then, why doesn't she get a divorce?"

"She's getting one as fast as she can."

"Who is her husband?"

"That I prefer not to tell for the present."

"You know, Monsieur," said de Marsac scornfully. "You've done me a greater wrong than you seem to realize. Here I have been approaching your niece as a pure and innocent girl."

"She is a pure and innocent girl," Peter answered sharply. "The marriage was only a nominal one."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. It sounds fantastic to me. If you would only explain further."

"I fear I can't."

"Well, I must go. But I feel I have been made a fool of, and for the first time in my life. It is very humiliating. I don't see how I can ever forgive you for what you have done. Mind you, I love her still. That's what hurts."

"It's not her fault, poor child. You mustn't blame her."

"Yes, I love her still, but not in the same way. Innocent or not, I never could approach her again as I have done, even when she is free. And you say she will be free soon?"

"I hope so."

"Then I may yet make her mine. I must think it over. I would like to hear the truth from her own lips. Ah! you don't know, Monsieur, what a bitter wound you've dealt me."

He bowed with stern dignity, and miserably Peter accompanied him to the door.

He returned to the dining-room and sank into an easy chair before the fire. There he remained, plunged in thought, and he was still thinking when Pascaline entered.

"You saw him?" she said eagerly.

"I certainly did," grimly.

"And what happened?"

"I told him that you were married."

"You did!"

"I thought it was best. We'd have to tell him sometime. I hope you're not sorry."

"No, I'm glad. I hated sailing under false colours. How did he take it?"

"Like a good sport. I felt a worm."

"I, too, feel incredibly mean. But it's so hard for me to realize I'm married. I always feel as if I wasn't. And I'm really not—only legally I mean."

"I never told him," said Peter, "because I never thought it would come to a show-down. Now I see I should have 'shooed' him off at the start. But it would have taken so much explaining, so I just let things rip. Well, between us we've made a pretty fool of him. What a crushing blow to his pride! I could have crawled into a knothole."

"Please don't worry, Peter dear. We could hardly help ourselves. It was so natural to keep silence. We made a mistake, that's all. I should like to see him again to ask him to forgive me."

"You'll have a chance, I expect."

"Do you really think we will see any more of him?"

"If I can judge my man, yes. He seems terribly keen on you. He won't give you up readily."

"Do you believe that when I'm free he'll still want to marry me?"

"If he does, will you accept him?"

"I'd do it to please you, Uncle Peter. And I might do it because he's so compelling. He simply makes one do things. But I don't want to. He's a splendid man, a gentleman,

but I just don't feel worthy of him. I feel I should lose all personality if I married him. I should be effaced."

"That's what I feel too. He stultifies one."

"Did you tell him to whom I was married?"

"No. That has nothing to do with him."

"We may have to give him the whole story."

"And if, after that, he again asks you to marry him?"

"I think I will, but I do hope he won't ask."

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Just before dinner, Spirelli came to see Peter.

"I'm going up to Paris to-night," he announced.

"Something new?"

"I don't know yet. I've been thinking of what you said this morning."

"What?"

"Of the possible innocence of old Ragon. You know, Machard's head was smashed in by a heavy, blunt instrument, and there was nothing of the kind found on the grounds."

"That's true. If Ragon did it, how did he dispose of the weapon?"

"Perhaps someone else did it and Ragon is the scapegoat."

"Well, there's not much time between now and the trial to find out. Is that what you're going to Paris about?"

"Not exactly. I've been seeing Ah Foo, the Chinaman, and I think I have news of Doctor Chavas."

"Alive?"

"If my information is accurate, very much alive. But I'm going to make sure."

"That may throw light on the Le Gildo crime; but will it have anything to do with Castel Blanc?"

"Somehow I think there's a connection between the two, perhaps only a distant link."

"You remember my suspicions of the Abbé Grégoire?"

"Yes. The capture of Ragon rather squashed our theories in that quarter. But sometimes I wonder . . ."

"So do I," said Peter. "I firmly believe that old chap is innocent. Whether we can save him or not is another question."

"Well, we'll see. We'll do our best."

CHAPTER FOUR

A DISASTER

In a little side street close to the Pantheon, there is an ancient door set in a mildewed wall. Over the door is the sign: "Laboratoire d'Embryologie."

A long, low building is fitted up as a laboratory, while in a narrow court half a dozen dogs are generally to be seen. These dogs change often, but are usually of the mongrel type. They play in an uneasy fashion, as if conscious of a sinister destiny. Occasionally from the dilapidated building one hears screams of animal torture.

From this door, on a drizzly evening of March, a man emerged. He was clean shaven and wore a coat with a fur collar that muffled him to the ears. His hat-brim, too, was dipped down; so that all that could be seen of his face was a yellow triangle set with gleaming eyes. As he stepped into the street he cast about him a look at once searching and furtive; then at a rapid pace he made off in the direction of the Gobelins.

No sooner had he turned the nearest corner than a tall shadow stole from the darkness and followed him. Along the twists of the gloomy streets the pursuer darted, till they came to the seething rue Mouffetard. There, in a raffle of stale humanity he lost his man. A little later, however, he

found him seated at the back of a narrow *bistro*, whose zinc-lined bar and leprous walls harboured a score of individuals of the apache type. The man who was following walked in, and seeing no other place vacant, sat down at the table opposite his quarry.

"May I, Monsieur?"

The man with the fur collar nodded grudgingly. He shot a furtive glance at the new-comer and started slightly. For the side of the face turned towards him was cleft by a long, angry scar. There they sat for some moments without speaking; then the man with the scar said softly:

"Doctor Chavas, I believe."

With a violent start, the other made a quick movement of his hand to his chin.

"No, sir, you deceive yourself. That is not my name."

"Doctor Hégésippe Chavas," went on the mutilated man quietly. "Late of Auberon and now working as an assistant in the Laboratory of Embryology under the name of Jules Simon. I am not mistaken. You have shaved your face, but otherwise you are unchanged. I have a photograph of you in my pocket by which I can identify you. Also, I am of the secret police who have been seeking you so long."

"You don't want to arrest me?" demanded the man in an agitated whisper.

"For what, my dear Chavas?"

"Ah yes," exclaimed the other quickly. "For what? I have done nothing. Why have you shadowed me?"

"Because we think you could throw some light on the murder of Angèle Ragon."

A look of terror came into the eyes of Doctor Chavas. "Ah no, I swear it. I know nothing of her death."

He was greatly moved. His breath seemed to catch in his throat, and he moistened his lips feverishly.

"Perhaps you would not mind accompanying me to the *Suret *, where you could no doubt convince us of that."

"But what have you against me?"

"Nothing much, I confess. Only you disappeared immediately the body was discovered, and here I find you under an assumed name and with an attempt at a disguise. That, you must admit, needs explaining."

The doctor nodded. Then suddenly: "How do I know I am talking to a member of the secret police and not—well, to someone sent by *him*?"

"I don't understand you, but first I'll convince you of my authority. My name is Paul Spirelli. Here is my card with my photograph. You will have no trouble in recognizing me, though the official stamp does in some merciful manner hide my mutilated face. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," said Chavas sullenly.

"Like yourself," went on Spirelli smoothly, "I am a man of education, a Doctor of Science. As such I have long been familiar with your writings."

"I have devoted myself to the cause of scientific research," muttered Doctor Chavas.

"I know. Alone in the outskirts of that remote fishing village you have never ceased to pursue your investigations. You were a recluse, a misogynist; and no one thought to associate you with the brilliant Chavas who wrote the famous articles on the origin of cancer."

Doctor Chavas nodded.

"Humanity has reasons to be grateful to you; as a fellow student I approach you in a spirit of sympathy. In a way we are brothers; so perhaps you will aid me in my efforts to clear up the murder of Angèle Ragon."

The doctor seemed more reassured. Better this sympathetic agent than the grim Chief of the Sureté. He made up his mind to speak:

"First of all," he said, "tell me how you traced me."

"Willingly. I have been cultivating your Chinaman. Poor Ah Foo! He, too, is under suspicion, but they can get

nothing out of him. Fortunately I know a little Chinese, and I found written in Chinese letters on the corner of some paper an address. The paper was the wrapping of a jar of preserved ginger he had received from Paris. The address was your lodging here."

"Yes, I knew he was worrying about me. I wanted him to know that at least I was alive. So I had a merchant send him that jar of ginger and scribbled my address in faint Chinese characters. Perhaps he didn't even notice it, but you did. I congratulate you, Monsieur."

"Luck favoured me. At your lodging I found that under the name of Jules Simon you were working in the laboratory of Professor Legrand."

"I wash bottles, sweep floors."

"And you could lecture even to their instructors."

"Perhaps. I am a specialist, you see. However, I was glad enough to do what I'm doing. Legrand and I were at college together and he gave me the place. I told him everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, enough to account for my disappearance."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth, Monsieur, just as I am going to tell it to you. You see, I knew Angèle Ragon from the time she was a little girl. She used to call at the house with fish, and as I never eat meat I was one of her best customers. Ah Foo liked her. It was he who gave her that pin. But I assure you there never was a more innocent girl till . . ."

Doctor Chavas hesitated and his eyes had a far-away look.

"Till what?" said Spirelli softly.

"Till she met the man who ruined her."

"Ah! Who was that?"

"That's what I want to know," said Chavas. Then he bent forward and, staring into Spirelli's eyes, he added hoarsely: "That's what I'm here to find out."

"But why your sudden disappearance? Why are you in hiding?"

"Because I feared interference by the police before I attained my object."

"Interference by the police!"

"Yes. Because I have a guilty conscience. Because I have come within the clutches of the law. I will explain . . . Angèle Ragon ran away to Paris, as so many of our village girls do. The lure of that siren city. They want life, luxury, excitement. They go as domestic servants and, too often, they end on the streets. Angèle, too, was tempted. She told me she had a place as a lady's maid. I believe she had, but she did not stay there long. For a while she disappeared completely. What she did is known only to me, and that vaguely."

"What happened?"

"She went to live with a man. Who he was I never found out. I'm trying to trace him now, but of one thing I'm sure—the man who betrayed her was responsible for her death."

"And where do you come in?" demanded Spirelli sharply.

"I will tell you. I got a telegram from Angèle, begging me to come and see her. I found her living in a small garret in a Paris slum. The man had deserted her. She was sick, —tuberculosis, like so many of those country girls who come to Paris. Also, she was going to have a child. Now, here is my crime in the eyes of the law: I performed an illegal operation on her. It was merciful, and I do not regret it; but someone got to know about it, and from that time on I have had anonymous letters threatening to denounce me. For myself I do not care, but I am jealous of my name. That threat has been held over me, so that I have kept silent about my visit to her."

"Did you never see her after that visit?"

"Only once. I got her into a nursing home and she improved in health. Then one day she returned to Auberon,

to her father. There was a terrible scene, for in his later days Ragon had become a religious maniac. That his daughter had gone wrong was something he could not forgive. I think he drove her out. In any case, I saw her just after she had left him. She was going back to Paris, so I gave her some money and good advice. I also told her if she wanted any more help to let me know. . . . I never saw her again."

"On that occasion was she wearing the pin?"

"She was. I remember it distinctly, for I chaffed the Chinaman about it. She wore it in her hat."

"And a little later," said Spirelli grimly, "she wore it in her heart."

"Yes. She must have met her death a few hours after, for she was never seen in the neighbourhood again. . . . You see, Monsieur, how I am involved in all this. How I might even be suspected of having had a hand in the crime. When I heard of the discovery of her body, I was horror-stricken."

"But . . . you fled before it was identified," said Spirelli quietly.

"Yes, I didn't even wait for that. I had always a feeling that something tragic had happened to her; and so, with a suspicion that almost amounted to certainty, I felt that the remains must be hers. I left that morning."

"You were wrong. You should have waited and told all you knew."

"I know. But I am a simple scientist. I know nothing of, and dread the law. I acted on impulse, thinking that everything would soon blow over. Yet there was another reason. I wanted to be free; free to find the man who lured her to Paris, deserted her and, I am convinced, killed her."

Then bending forward he added in an eager whisper: "I believe I am on the track of that man at last."

"Do you know the man?"

"I do."

"Several are suspected," said Spirelli, eyeing him keenly. "There's her father, now arrested for the Castel Blanc murders."

"Bah! the old man is a maniac, but he wouldn't kill."

"Not even for vengeance?"

"He did once. But he had no hand in the death of his daughter. Nor do I believe he is responsible for the Castel Blanc crimes."

"That's interesting. . . ." Spirelli waited for Chavas to develop some further theory, but the doctor shut up suddenly.

"In any case, he'll soon be executed for them," went on Spirelli. "It would be difficult to save him now."

"He *must* be saved," said Chavas eagerly. "For that we must work. Within the next few days we must prove his innocence."

"I agree with you. But to return to Angèle Ragon. You know that your Chinaman is under suspicion."

"Ah Foo wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Some think that if you are not dead you yourself had a hand in it."

"So much the more reason to remain in hiding till I find my man."

Spirelli bent forward, laying his hand on the arm of Chavas:

"Tell me, doctor, who do you suspect of this crime?"

For a long time Chavas hesitated, then he, too, bent forward:

"I'll tell you. I suspect the man who, by his profane delving into the obscene has become himself obscene; who, by his study of monsters, has himself become a monster; the very man who, drawn like a criminal to the scene of his crime, himself laid bare the body."

"You mean . . ."

"One who has committed so many crimes he even forgets them. But we must prove it, and prove it quickly. And,

mark my words, when we find the man responsible for the death of Angèle Ragon, we will have the man who committed all the other murders, the arch-assassin of Castel Blanc."

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Spirelli had intended to catch the night train for Tremorac, but by the time he had made certain arrangements and had come to a clear understanding with Doctor Chavas, it was too late. So he took a room in a near-by hotel and caught the morning express.

At Chartres there was a derailment and his train was delayed for two hours. He cursed the time lost, then wired to Peter not to meet him with the car, as he could not arrive till late. It was long after dark when he changed to the local train to Tremorac, and when he got there it was nearly midnight. What was his surprise, then, to see the big head lights of the car gleaming outside the station like the eyes of a friend. And in the car was Peter.

"You really shouldn't have done this," said Spirelli gratefully.

"It's Pascaline's doing. At dinner I told her you were coming and, in spite of the lateness of the hour, she insisted on me meeting you. Your room was prepared, she said; and Heaven knows what accommodation you would get at the White Goat."

"That was too kind of her. But I hate to drag you here."

"Me! Oh, that's all right. It's a fine night and I was glad of the outing."

Achille was driving, so that they reached the house in a very few minutes; but on the way Peter found time to ask:

"Well, has your trip had any success?"

"In a way greater than I hoped; in a way, less."

"Enigmatic, as usual."

"I mean I discovered things I didn't expect to, and I was baffled where I hoped to find light. I see where I have blun-

dered. But every discovery of error is a step nearer the truth."

"Did you meet Chavas?"

"I had a long talk with him."

"Did he tell you anything?"

"Much that doesn't seem to bear on our particular problem."

"Did he give you no idea as to who is our man?"

"At least he sharpened my conviction that Ragon isn't. But I'll tell you all about it when we get back."

"Then here we are. A quick run. Ha! I see no light in Pascaline's window. She must have gone to bed. She wanted to wait up and make you a cup of bouillon, but I told her not to. Hold on a moment, and if she's not asleep I'll tell her you arrived safely."

Spirelli heard him leaping up the stairs, then his voice came down: "Confound it! I mustn't spring upstairs like that. I forgot my heart. Slowly, always slowly."

As if to make up for his ill-considered energy, he went down the corridor very slowly indeed. Spirelli, listening, heard him call softly: "Are you awake, my dear?" Then, after a moment, sharply: "Pascaline!" Then, in an agitated voice: "Spirelli, quick!"

Spirelli took the stairs at a bound. A great fear flamed in him. He found Peter standing at the door of the girl's room, an expression of agony and despair on his face. In a moment Spirelli was at his side.

"Look!" said Peter pointing. "The bed's not been slept in and there's no sign of her."

He stood as if panic-stricken, but Spirelli pushed him aside and entered. A swift glance told him no one was there.

"Have you looked in your own room?"

"Yes," said Peter faintly, leaning against the door as if sick.

Spirelli's face grew suddenly very dark. He sniffed the air, then turned to Peter, his eyes dilated with terror.

"Chloroform!" he gasped.

Peter nodded helplessly. He looked as if he would collapse.

"Come, man, brace up," said Spirelli harshly. "She may be near. We may find her yet."

Peter tottered forward a few steps and fell on the bed.

"She's gone," he cried brokenly, "my poor little girl. That devil has got her this time. Oh, I loved her, Spirelli, I did indeed."

"I loved her too," said Spirelli, and his voice was like a snarl. "But that won't save her. Come on, let's look everywhere."

They roused the Marteauss who, as usual, had heard nothing. Then, with Achille, they searched the house high and low.

There was no sign of Pascaline.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SECRET OF THE PIGEON-HOUSE

The dour dawn found them haggard and exhausted.

With a terrible fear in their hearts they had searched every foot of the grounds. No trace of her.

"You look utterly fagged out," said Spirelli. "Better lie down a bit."

Peter was indeed on the verge of crumpling up. His face was drawn, his eyes wide-circled. He trembled as with cold and there was a dragging heaviness in his chest. The anxiety had brought on one of his heart attacks, but he would not own it.

"No, I'm all right. We've got to find her."

"I've sent a message to the police. They'll be here soon to take up the search. You can do no more. Rest awhile and you'll be all the better."

Spirelli made him take a sleeping powder and a glass of hot milk. Peter's last words before he closed his eyes were: "You'll take a rest too, won't you, old chap? You need it more than I do."

"Yes, I'll lie down a bit."

But Spirelli did not for a moment cease his efforts. He seemed made of steel. He was everywhere; in the basement, the shrubbery, examining the ground with a magnifying glass, interviewing the gendarmes. Just before noon, when Peter woke up from a nightmarish sleep, he found Spirelli still at work. The face of the detective was rather ghastly, and there was a baffled look in his eyes.

The two lunched miserably, forcing down a little food and regarding each other with an air of despair. Once or twice Spirelli looked as if he was dozing off, but with strong coffee and cigarettes he braced up again.

"Let us try to imagine what happened," he said.

Peter shuddered. "That's just what I don't want to do."

"We've got to face things. Let me see . . . When you left her at ten o'clock she said she was going to bed. Do you suppose she went immediately?"

"She said she might sit by the fire to finish a book she was reading."

"Evidently she did,—if it was this new one I found on the table. She cuts the pages as she goes, and the ivory cutter rests in the last one. She read for a time, then laid her book there. She next turned down the lamp a little, for so we found it. Then she would go up to her room. Would she take a candle?"

"I don't think so. Since Ragon was captured, we have ceased to be afraid. The lamp on the dining-room table would illumine the hall, and the big lamp in the corridor would light the grand staircase. Also, as you have seen, it would partly light her room. There was no reason why she should carry a candle."

"Well then, she went up to her room, and went straight to

the window where there is a small table on which stands a reading lamp. She lit this lamp, because the wick is charred instead of being trimmed and a burnt match lies beside it. Then she took off the evening gown she was wearing and put on a *peignoir*."

"She was wearing a white silk dress I ordered from Paris."

"It hangs on a hook in the wardrobe, and her dressing gown is gone. . . . Her next act was to stand before the dressing-table and let down her hair. This is evident, for her combs and hair-pins lie on the dressing-table. After that, she took her little hairbrush with the tortoise-shell handle and, sitting down on the chair in front of the mirror, she began to brush her hair."

"For at least a quarter of an hour every night she used to do that."

"I found the brush lying under the dressing-table, with finger prints that showed she had been using it the moment she was surprised. She was sitting, then, with her back to the door of your room when someone softly approached her."

"From where?"

"From your room. She would no doubt examine her own room before locking the door, but she wouldn't examine yours. Whoever attacked her had been concealed there."

"But how could he get there?"

"Ah! that's the question."

"He could scarcely get in by daylight," said Peter; "and as soon as it begins to get dark I lock the front door. The only other door is the kitchen one, but Madame Marteau and Suzanne are always there."

"That brings me back to my theory that there is a hidden entrance. I have searched the premises but I have found nothing. However, to continue . . . Whoever approached her slipped from your room into hers. He held a cloth soaked in chloroform over her face. She could not cry out. I doubt if she even saw who it was. Then her assailant

blew out the light, lifted her, unlocked the door of her room and carried her away."

"But by where?"

"By the way he came. You locked the front door when you went out and it was still locked. The kitchen door was locked on the inside, and all the windows were likewise fastened on the inside. Another proof of a secret entrance."

"I can't understand it," said Peter. "To where would a secret entrance to the house lead?"

"That's another question. If there is one, it must have an outlet."

Spirelli was thoughtful, then he rose suddenly. "Excuse me a moment," he said.

When he returned there was a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"I am a fool," he cried. "Why did I not think of it before?"

"What?"

"The pigeon-house. The day I broke open the door I put it in place again; but fixed a piece of adhesive paper between the edge and the frame. No one could open the door without breaking the paper. When I last looked, it was intact; now it is torn. Do you suppose anyone from the house has been in there?"

"I don't think so."

"*Someone* has,—in the last three days. Will you come with me?"

They took the tangled trail to the little grey tower. Spirelli pushed open the door and, once more, they were in that octagonal interior with its straw-littered floor. There was no sign of any change.

"I'm going to have another look at the well," said Spirelli. He cleared away the straw, pulled up on the ring-bolt and hoisted open the trap. Again they peered into the depths of the well. Spirelli was bent over, trying to pierce the blackness.

"I wish I'd brought a torch," he muttered.

"I'll run and get one," said Peter.

When he returned no one was visible. As he paused, a little puzzled, he heard a voice coming from the well. Spirelli was standing on the iron ladder that was morticed into the masonry.

"Give me the torch. I'm going down."

Peter was seized with a great fear. What could Spirelli expect to find in the well? He had a heart-quaking vision of Pascaline's body sunk in that still water. He watched the detective descend till the man became a dark blur and the light of the torch was like a Will-of-the-wisp. Then there was a long pause, and hollowly the voice of Spirelli came up.

"I've found something."

"Yes," said Peter quaveringly.

"A sheet-iron door let into the masonry and fastened with a bolt."

"Can you open it?"

"I'm trying to. . . . Ah! I've done it. It opens into a dark passage."

Straining his eyes, Peter saw that Spirelli had disappeared. The light was gone; nothing but stone walls sheering down to dark water. With intense anxiety he waited; then presently came the voice of the detective:

"Can you come down the ladder?"

"I'm coming."

"Go cautiously then. You'll find the door about six feet above the water, and to the right of the ladder."

Peter found the ladder comparatively easy to descend. It rather reminded him of a fire escape. Soon he was deep in the coolness of the well, and the day, like a pallid patch of light, was above him. There! he had reached the door.

Spirelli was examining a narrow tunnel of rough masonry, cemented underfoot. Peter could see his light boring the blackness, and could hear his voice trembling with excitement.

"A great discovery! Why should this passage be here? We must see where it leads. Follow me carefully."

With every step Spirelli examined the walls, the roof, the floor. Now he was on his knees and the ring of light was moving like a live thing before him. Suddenly Peter saw his hand in the torch-glow, his finger pointing.

"Look! the dust of the mortar has made a deposit on the floor, and here are footmarks. We can see them distinctly, so they must be recent. Some are coming, some going. But I can't understand. They're not made with shoes, neither are they bare feet. They look like pads."

"Moccasins," suggested Peter.

"That's it,—moccasins."

Again they advanced in the same careful fashion. The passage seemed to rise gradually and with a slight inclination to the right.

"The air is not so bad," said Spirelli; "which shows there is a slight air current. The well is about two hundred metres from the house and we have almost come that distance. We should be near the end now."

He was right. A few paces brought them to the limit of the passage. It was walled up waist-high, but the remaining space was closed in by thick pine boarding. Spirelli scanned this closely.

"Aha! I thought so."

The light rested on a perpendicular bolt that was fixed in the stone work, and shot up into an iron socket on the wood. Spirelli withdrew the bolt and, wedging his fingers between the wood and stone, lifted outward. The heavy woodwork rose as on hinges, revealing a black, boxlike interior. Spirelli climbed up. When again he spoke his voice was full of chagrin.

"Pah! What a fool I am!"

"What's the matter? Have you found nothing?"

"Everything. But I might have known. Can you come up here?"

The space was not any too great. Peter found himself crouching with Spirelli in what seemed to be a wooden box with a sloping roof.

"Push on the top," said the detective.

Peter did so. It rose like a lid and he found himself gazing into what seemed a cellar. At one end were stone steps down which a faint light filtered. He felt like a jack-in-the-box.

"Do you know where you are?" asked Spirelli.

"No."

"In your own cellar, under the kitchen. You're in the coal-box."

"Great Scott!"

"Hush! they'll hear."

But the warning was too late. From the top of the stairs came a cry of alarm. "Anyone there?"

Peter lowered his head. "It's Madame Marteau," he whispered. Then again he heard:

"Suzanne, fetch a light. I heard voices down in the cellar."

"Perhaps it's the gendarmes," came the reply of Suzanne.

"No, they've gone. But I'm sure I heard someone."

"Maybe it's ghosts," faltered Suzanne.

"Come on. Don't be a fool."

"Let's get away," whispered Spirelli. "We don't want them to see us."

Softly they descended, closed the back of the bunker and bolted it. Above them they could hear the two women in the cellar. It gave Peter a queer, furtive feeling. Then they retraced their steps down the passage to the well.

"That's one thing settled," said Spirelli with a sigh. "We know how he got into the house. We know how he took her away."

"But it doesn't help us to find her," said Peter bitterly.

"Everything helps. I feel the fates are with us now."

Peter was staring into the depths of the well. "I don't

suppose it's any use looking down there," he said faintly.

Spirelli played his torch on the water, but it was like a wafer of celluloid floating on ink.

"Why, no," he replied scornfully. "You're getting morbid. You mustn't take such a hopeless view of things."

They prepared to climb the ladder and the detective was flashing the light at random when Peter uttered a cry. Bending down he clutched at something. "Look!"

He held in his fingers a little black hair-pin.

"That's the kind she wears. Crinkly ones. I found it in a crevice in the floor."

"Conclusive proof. I wonder I overlooked it. We must have another search."

But though they examined every foot of the passage, they found no other trace of the girl, and it was with heavy heart Peter mounted the ladder. Spirelli closed the entrance carefully and covered it.

"We'd better say nothing of this," he remarked. "I'm going to set a trap in that passage, a trap for a beast."

When they got back to the house they were both exhausted. They had coffee and brandy and tobacco, after which Spirelli seemed to recover his energy.

"Don't get down-hearted," he conjured Peter. "I haven't a doubt we'll find her alive and well."

"I'd give everything I have in the world for that," said Peter.

"I've nothing but my life," said Spirelli, "and I'd gladly give that. But we'll save her yet. And now let us continue our reconstruction of the affair."

He thought for a moment. "It must have been a powerful man. Pascaline is not heavy, but only a very strong man could carry her downstairs, along the passage, and up that ladder. He probably threw her over one shoulder. Her arms and head would hang over his back, her hair streaming down. He evidently knew every step of the way. He closed the trap door and covered it; then put the broken door back

in position. He overlooked nothing. It is, then, someone with unusual strength, extreme knowledge of the place, and infinite cunning. Who answers this description? And the further question is: When he left the pigeon-house, where did he go?"

In an attempt to solve this problem, Spirelli spent the remainder of the afternoon. He searched the sands, the rocks, the fields. Darkness alone forced him to cease his efforts. Yet, after dinner, without a word of explanation he disappeared.

A prey to the wildest fears, Peter spent a sleepless night. Once he rose and looked in Spirelli's room, but the detective had not returned. Where was he? Off no doubt on a fresh trail. The man seemed to have an inexhaustible vitality.

In the grey grimace of the dawn, Peter rose heavily. His head felt like a weight on his shoulders. Excitement and anxiety were wearing him out. A little more of it and he wouldn't be able to rise at all. His heart troubled him, with all the signs of an approaching crisis.

Where was Spirelli? In this extremity the man was a source of strength to him. Without the Italian he felt he would go mad. The garden bell rang and his heart gave a bound. Perhaps that was him.

But it was only the telegraph boy from Tremorac with a green envelope addressed to the detective. Peter propped it on the mantelpiece and subsided into a mood of utter misery. He was too wretched even to think; and it was thus, limp of body and lustreless of eye, that Spirelli found him. The detective himself looked the picture of weariness and threw himself dejectedly into a chair. He was haggard, his clothes were dirty.

"Where have you been?" asked Peter dully.

"Everywhere. Searching the big sea marsh, hunting in the rocky caves out beyond the island."

"And not a sign?"

"Not one."

"I've an idea," said Peter. "She may have eloped."

"Eloped with a man who has abducted her! Don't be idiotic."

"You never can tell about a woman. Caveman tactics, you know."

"Bah!" snarled Spirelli, "the very idea is crazy."

He relapsed into a morose silence which was broken by Peter.

"There's a telegram for you up there. It came this morning."

Spirelli became alert again. He sprang up, tore open the envelope. "Why didn't you tell me before?" he snapped.

Then he started. "Can I have the car quick? I want to catch the train for Paris."

"Right away. But what's the news?"

Spirelli handed him the telegram. It read:

"Come at once. Important developments. Jules Simon."

CHAPTER SIX

THE TWO INTERVIEWS

After tossing sleeplessly, a prey to terrifying thoughts, Peter rose unrefreshed.

The dawn, peering in like a stale jade, found him weary and dispirited. He funk'd the coming day: hours of agony and suspense, draining him of his little hope that remained. So, haggard and dismal as the dawn itself, he arose. In the olden days he would have bucked up with Scotch whisky. Indeed in his time he had imbibed the share of half-a-dozen men. Now, however, he regarded even the medicinal brandy with distrust. If he went out it would not be by the door of a drunkard.

Aimlessly he wandered down to the rocky edge of his do-

main. Drab grey sky and mud grey sea. Dripping boughs overhead and sodden turf underfoot. Rain in the wind. No comfort anywhere. How alone he was! He couldn't stand much of that sort of thing. He would go dotty, or plug a hole in his hide. But no! He wasn't that sort. It wasn't done. He'd stick the thing out, however unsufferable.

So he returned to his room and brooded over a little packet he valued beyond all else in the world. There were letters from his dead wife, snapshots of his dead child. Poor girl! Poor kid! They didn't "make the grade." Even now, looking at these faded letters and dim photos, the old grief clutched him by the throat, wrung tears from his eyes. His own girl would have been about the age of Pascaline. . . . Every anniversary of her death he had torn open the old wound by trying to picture her as she would have grown in grace and sweetness. As he stared at a blurred picture of his wife, his mouth had a pinched look and his eyes were bitterly sad.

"Perhaps she'll be waiting for me when I go over," he muttered; "she and the kiddy. Ah! my little one . . . She'd be quite a glorious girl now. . . . Oh God!"

A step on the terrace roused him, and through the window he saw the tall figure of Hector de Marsac.

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De Marsac was in black, looking very grave and stern. He shook Peter almost affectionately by the hand.

"My poor friend, what terrible news!"

"Then you've heard?"

"Yes, in Rennes an hour ago. I have come at once to see you. It's true then?"

"Alas! too true."

"But what happened?"

"We know nothing. She has disappeared."

"And you can find no trace of her?"

Peter hesitated. Should he take de Marsac into his con-

fidence? A strong man. A man of profound experience. If anyone could help him, surely de Marsac could. Yet Spirelli didn't want him to say more than was necessary. He was mindful of Spirelli as he answered:

"No trace."

As de Marsac paced up and down, it was evident he was a prey to the most violent emotion. Peter could see that by the tense clutching of his hands and the moving muscles of his jaw. De Marsac was repressing feelings stronger than he cared to show. But suddenly he seemed to lose all self-control. He turned to Peter, his brow knitted, his eyes blazing.

"It's monstrous," he cried passionately; "all that's happened in this accursed house. And now this crowning calamity. Why didn't you take her away? Why did you tempt the demon that seems to lurk here? My God! man, I adored your niece; adored her, you hear! It drives me mad to think of what may have happened to her. I can't bear even the thought. I love her now, insanely. Ah! you phlegmatic Englishmen! you don't understand how we feel, we Latins. Why couldn't you let me know when all these things happened? Perhaps if I had been on the spot I might have done something."

Peter was surprised at his outburst; a little shamed too. Such exposure of emotion didn't seem quite decent. A man should hide this sort of feeling.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you're never in this part of the country when anything happens."

"That's true. My work takes me away so much. And yet, all the while, I felt afraid. I seemed to have a presentiment. Even this last time, after so long an interval, I had a sense of impending danger. Oh, if I had only warned you! But it seemed foolish. And I always wanted to stay here to guard her. . . . But I am talking wildly, unreasonably. You'll excuse me, Monsieur. Perhaps I cared for her even more than you did."

Peter was silent. In the presence of such anguish his own seemed colourless.

"You know," de Marsac went on chokingly, "when you told me she was already married it was a terrible shock to me. You see, I had thought of her as an ideal, a marvellous girl, all innocence and purity. Of course, you told me nothing of the story; but even though I did not doubt she was still innocent and pure, the thought of a marriage to another tortured me. I determined to get over it. Alas! I found that the most fatal way to remember is to try desperately to forget. I still dreamed of her. As soon as she was free I determined to ask her again to marry me. Ah! Monsieur, it is only once in a lifetime one can hunger like that for a woman."

De Marsac's voice broke and, as he stared out of the window, there was a glitter of tears in his eyes.

"Sorry," said Peter awkwardly. "I didn't think you cared so much."

De Marsac laughed bitterly.

"Why should I have shown it to you? You never wanted me to have her. You were jealous of my love for her. You wanted to keep all her affection for yourself. You were prepared to sacrifice her future to your selfish needs. I would have made her happy; I would have devoted myself to doing that, but you didn't trust me. You trusted others more than you did me."

"What do you mean?"

"This Spirelli who is always in the house, and with whom you seem so friendly. What do you know of him? Ah! believe me, Monsieur, I see clearer than you. I do not want to reproach you. Through my profession I have had a profounder experience of men and life than you have, and, let me tell you, with men of that class one can never be too careful. Understand, I have nothing against him. I suggest nothing. But I have looked up his *dossier* and there is much

to be accounted for. So I warn you. He is a deep one. Be on your guard."

"I won't believe Spirelli isn't straight," said Peter stoutly.

De Marsac shrugged his shoulders. "What do you suppose has happened to your niece?" he demanded abruptly.

"I suppose she's been kidnapped."

"She wouldn't by any chance . . . elope."

Although this had been his own suggestion, Peter resented it coming from de Marsac.

"She's not that sort."

De Marsac nodded. "You think, then, she's still . . . alive?"

"Of course. I believe we'll hear of her before long." (Brave words, but his heart belied them.)

"Pray God you're right. . . . You know, this puts a new aspect on the Ragon case. It shows there's more than one in that affair. You caught the old man red-handed, but there's a greater criminal behind. Well, as soon as this trial is over, I'm going to give all my time, my energy, my brain to drag that other out."

"Won't Ragon say anything?"

"Not a word. He'll go to the guillotine with his lips sealed. You know, it is our way to believe a man guilty till he can prove himself innocent; but Ragon will make no effort to explain his presence in the garden on that night."

"The weapon was never found," said Peter.

"Which adds to my belief that there was more than one; that Ragon was only an accomplice, and that the master-villain remains unsuspected. . . . But now I must get back to Rennes at once. The car is waiting and I have not time even to visit my own place. The Assize Court begins its sittings to-morrow and we open with the Ragon case. You will give your testimony, so I will see you in court; but in the meantime let me beg of you a great favor."

"Willingly."

"If you get the smallest clue, if you have the faintest glimmer of hope, please let me know at once. You have no idea how much it will mean to me. And now, my dear fellow, a last whisper in your ear: Be distrustful of Monsieur Spirelli."

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While Peter was still thinking over this interview, he was surprised by the announcement of another visitor. It was the Abbé Grégoire.

The priest looked massive, even monumental, sitting on the edge of the Morris chair. His big hairy hands were folded on his lap. The lower part of his pale face had the grimy look of one whom no amount of shaving will thwart the design of nature to provide with a long and luxuriant beard. Missionaries cultivate such beards, lending colour to the idea of the Indians that the Christian God is a huge man with whiskers.

The face of the Abbé Grégoire looked as impressive as his big black-skirted body. It was as knobby as that of a wooden idol, knobby temples, knobby cheek-bones, knobby jowls. His manner was portentous in its gravity, and he lost no time in coming to the object of his visit.

"It's about Ragon," he said in his grating voice. "You are going to testify against Ragon, probably to-morrow."

"I believe so."

"Do you know that you are helping to convict an innocent man?"

"I can only tell the truth."

"It is not always good to tell the truth. Now, for instance, if you had seen someone else in the shrubbery . . . You are sure you did not?"

"I saw no one else."

"Think again. Did you not see even a shadow, the merest suggestion of a man?"

Peter thought: "He'll be making me believe next I *did* see someone else." But he repeated: "No, I saw no one."

The Abbé went on: "You know no weapon has been found with which Ragon could have done the deed."

"Yes, that's a point in his favour. But why was he in the garden at all?"

"I will tell you," said the Abbé solemnly. "He was there because . . . because I sent him."

Peter stared. "You sent him! But why? I don't understand."

"Yes," said the Abbé impassively, "Ragon was there at my instigation. Listen and I'll explain . . . There's no one can overhear us?"

"No one."

"All right." All the same the Abbé lowered his voice. "I've known Ragon for twenty years. We are friends. In fact, I was the only friend he had, and I helped him in every way I could. I was sorry for him. Ragon's heart was broken once, and when it healed his daughter broke it a second time."

"I've heard something of that."

"He adored her, but he was a strongly religious man. He could not forgive her when she went wrong. There was one man he suspected of her ruin with a suspicion that was almost a certainty. If he could have proved it, he would have killed that man. He believed, too, that that same man, through fear of exposure and dread of his vengeance, silenced her for ever. Is it not conceivable?"

"It's possible."

"Now Ragon came to see me and told me all. It was I alone who restrained him from wreaking a premature revenge on the man he thought had killed his child. 'Let us have proof,' I counselled; 'let us be sure.' But it happened that I, too, suspected the same man, and not only of the murder of Angèle Ragon, but also of the Castel Blanc crimes. For

strong reasons, into which I have no time to go at present, I had suspected him all along, and it was I who suggested to Ragon that he watch at night in your shrubbery. He did so, particularly at the full of the moon. Well, on three different occasions he saw this man slip up from the beach and disappear behind your house. Do you know who that man was?"

"No."

"The Doctor Chavas."

"But . . . Great Scott! I never thought of him."

"Ah! my poor Monsieur, you have much to learn. Doctor Chavas is one of the most astute criminal minds of the century. He disappeared after the finding of the body. Why? Not because he feared discovery, but because he feared the vengeance of old Ragon, feared that Angèle had betrayed him to her father on her last visit."

"But if he disappeared on the discovery of the body, it could not have been he who killed Machard."

"What was to prevent him returning? Indeed he *did* return. Ragon saw him one night along by the sea wall. He seemed to have shaved off his whiskers, but Ragon was sure it was Chavas. However, the man ran like a hare and vanished."

"It's very strange. . . . Then, what do you suppose happened on the night of the crime?"

"What happened was probably this: Ragon was watching as usual. The night was very dark and wild. He could see nothing, but in the lightning glare he may have distinguished a moving shadow and run towards it. Then—this is my supposal only, for I have not seen the old man since his arrest—in his pursuit he stumbled over the body. Naturally he would bend down to see if the man was dead, so that his hands puddled in the hot blood. Of course he was horror-stricken, and while he was wondering what to do, you found him."

"It seems quite possible."

"The other, the man with the bludgeon escaped. And now Ragon, whom I know to be innocent, will mount the scaffold."

"But," broke in Peter, "why have you not told all this to the examining magistrate? It might have turned the scale in the old man's favour."

"Nothing short of the discovery of the real murderer would save him," said the Abbé grimly.

"And why will not old Ragon speak?"

"He shields the memory of his daughter. He also keeps silent out of a feeling of loyalty to me. Besides, he's a broken-hearted man who does not care whether he lives or dies."

"But it's your duty to tell all this," said Peter with some excitement. "You never know what effect it might have."

"I have hesitated," said the Abbé, "because I want to have proof. I want to bring it home to the real culprit. But if I do not find out anything before the trial, one thing I promise you . . ."

"What is that?"

"That I'll be in Court that day and that I'll stand up and tell this story."

"If you don't, I will. We will do our best to save Ragon."

"We *must* save him. That was the reason I came here. I want to ask a favour."

"Go on."

"I want your permission to watch in the grounds to-night. It's the last chance. Perhaps I may see something."

"Granted. Only I don't think there's much hope."

"One never knows," said the Abbé rising. "That's settled then. To-night I watch in the grounds."

"And good luck to you."

"Ah!" said the Père Grégoire, enveloping Peter's small hot hand with his large cold one. "We never know. Let us trust in Providence."

CHAPTER SEVEN

PETER GETS PICKLED

It was after dinner the same evening. Peter, cowering before the fire, looked the image of misery. His body was limp, but his heart hurried furiously. He could not sleep, and every waking moment was weariness. The hours lagged like worn-out beasts of burden.

Finally he rose and, going to the kitchen, he returned with a bottle of rum. He would drink. Let it kill him—the sooner the better. Now that Pascaline was gone he didn't care any more. He would drown despair, hasten the end. He had kept decent for her sake; now let decency go to the devil.

So he downed a couple of glasses and felt like a new man. Hope returned. He would find her again. She would fill his heart with sunshine. They would go away, forget all these others. Ah! it was good to drink. Already his heart was better; he was even feeling drowsy.

So his head fell forward and he dozed in his chair. But he had a most appalling dream. He dreamt he found the body of Pascaline at the bottom of the old well and heard at the same moment the shrill howl of a wolf. Then, looking up the well shaft, he saw a face gazing down on him. He could not make it out very clearly. . . . Ah! if only he could! At one moment it seemed like Ragon, then it was the Abbé Grégoire, then it changed to Doctor Chavas. Nay, it was even Spirelli. Curse all their faces! They baffled him.

All at once, with a strange, fluttering fear, he started half awake and, as if by instinct, his eyes sought the window. It was unshuttered. The hasp was broken, he remembered. Achille had orders to mend it.

Then, slowly, as he looked,—still a little dazed with sleep,—he realized that he was staring at a *face*. It was a very

white face and it was pressed tightly against the window. . . . There! it was gone. . . .

Perhaps it had been part of his dream. Yet Pascaline had seen such a face. Could it be . . . ? Oh, if it would come again! Well, he would give it a chance. He would pretend to sleep.

So he closed his eyes, but after a while, by a queer chill in his spine, he knew that the face was there. He was sitting in the faint fire-glow. The lamp was low, the outer night very dark. He knew he was exposed, knew someone was watching him. He had only to look to see who, but—he hesitated. He wanted to be sure this time. He felt that it was so very important, that he was on the verge of a revelation. At last, very slowly, he opened his eyes. . . .

He was looking at the window now, but his eyes stared with horror. For it was something peculiarly horrible he saw. It was indeed a face, but a face bestial in a way he never could have conceived of. It had a vampirish pallor. as of a creature that never sees the day. Coarse, knotted hair covered the brow. The nostrils were distended, the lips drawn back in a snarl of incredible malignance. The large teeth were sharp and cruel, and about the mouth was a sickly beard.

But it was the eyes that horrified him most. They were the eyes of a rabid beast. Wild, mindless eyes. And they were glaring at him with an expression that made him shudder. It was this violent shudder that roused him. He leapt to his feet. . . . Ha! the face was gone.

“It’s like someone I know,” he gasped; “the gross caricature of someone I know. A gargoyle of a face, done by a master of the macabre—yet . . . who does it remind me of?”

Well, it would come again; he was sure it would come again. It had been watching him, gloating over him, wanting his life, no doubt. Ah! he would fix it this time. He ran up to his room and got his automatic; then, opening the

front door, he peered out. There was no one in sight and it was very dark. Slipping out quietly, he softly closed the door and stole to the base of the terrace.

Then he crawled along in its shadow till he was opposite the lighted window. He could look right into the room, all a rosy glow. He could see his grog, his chair; nay, he almost imagined he could see himself. It struck him as bizarre that he should be out in the night, gazing into his own room like another watcher. Well, when the creature came again, it would be silhouetted against the light and he would get it, sure.

Lovingly he fingered his automatic. He was in a fever of impatience. How long it was in coming this time! Or the time seemed long. Perhaps it wouldn't come again; perhaps he had better go back to the room and wait there. He was trembling violently, but whether with cold or excitement he could not decide. Then he began to despair. Perhaps he had scared it off, perhaps . . .

Again he felt that same chill run down his spine. There! It was coming, coming—a black shape moving ever so softly along the terrace, crouching close to the side of the house. Beast or blood-thirsty maniac, what? In the shadow how grotesquely large it bulked! Formless, sinister, appalling. He fingered the draw of his pistol, got it ready. He would wait till the Thing was flat against the light, then pull. It was thrilling this, even more thrilling than a lion-hunt. Now it had crawled to the window, now . . .

Suddenly he saw the form of a man rear up against the light of the room, a huge form, black and terrible. Then, rising up and with hand that wavered in his excitement, he fired.

The creature made a leap, half swung round, was gone. It flung itself from the terrace and Peter heard it crashing through the shrubbery. He had hit it, by Gad! and he might repeat the dose. So again and again he fired in the

direction of the sound. Then, as he would have rushed after a beast of prey, so he rushed after the thing he had shot. He hoped he might bring it down; but it kept on,—round the back of the house, through the brush, wildly on. Still he followed, mad with the excitement of the chase.

“I’ll get it yet,” he cried exultantly. “I’ll track it to its lair.”

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It was two in the morning when Peter returned to the house. Throwing himself into a chair he poured with a shaking hand a glass of rum; then another. He was filthy with mud; his clothes were torn; but there was in his eyes a light of triumph.

“Well, I’m damned!” he muttered. Then again: “Well, I’m damned!”

It was thus Spirelli found him an hour later, half-fuddled and gibbering to himself.

“What’s the matter?” cried Spirelli, shaking him. Peter roused.

“How did you get here?” he queried with amazement.

“By car. I took a fast one. Came in eight hours. I couldn’t wait for the train. There are developments so serious I couldn’t delay even half a day. There’s not a moment to be lost. But—what have you been doing? Drowning your wits?”

“No, hunting. Hunting the biggest game I ever went after.”

“*Sapristi!* And did you kill?”

“Not yet, but I’m on the track. Sure thing this time. I’ve beaten you, you bloody detective, with all your fancy theories.”

“What do you mean? You’re drunk. Have you got a suspicion?”

“A certainty. What have you got?”

"Only a suspicion," said Spirelli; "—yet."

"Look here," said Peter, "write down the name of yours, and I'll write down mine."

Spirelli tore a strip from the edge of a journal, and scribbling something on it, folded it. "That's who. But we've work before us, desperate, dangerous work to prove it."

Tearing off a second strip, Peter wrote. "Yes," he agreed, "and mighty little time to do it in."

Gravely the two men exchanged papers, opened, read. Then, Spirelli stared blankly, while Peter gave a drunken laugh.

For the two names were the same.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ACCUSATION

It was the second day of the trial of Félix Ragon, fisherman of Auberon, for the murder of Achille Machard, Police Inspector at Tremorac.

During the previous day the Assize Court at Rennes had been packed to the point of protest. For hours before the opening of the court the crowd had waited in line. In the space reserved for the public they were jammed as tightly as matches in a new box, and must have suffered intense discomfort if not actual distress. Yet, so absorbing was the interest of the case that no one made any effort to escape. Indeed, during the day several women had fainted; but short of fainting no one would have lost a moment of this absorbing drama of justice.

And all over the land the interest taken in the case was intense. The newspapers devoted columns to it, with photographs (real and faked) of all who had even the remotest concern in it. The appetite of the Public was insatiable.

It seemed indeed as if the eyes of all France were focussed on that little stuffy criminal court at Rennes.

On a raised dais, reached by three steps and overhung by a canopy, sat the President in his red robes. On either side sat his brother Judges. To the left of the President was the witness box, to the right the jury. Below, on opposite sides of the court, were the Advocate General and the advocate for the defence. Behind and between them were the clerks of the court, the reporters, a number of privileged spectators. Among the latter sat Peter.

During the strain of the past two days he had been sustaining himself with brandy; so that he was in a fever of excitement—keyed up, in fact, to the point of hysteria. There were moments when he trembled like a leaf, others when he wanted to leap up and shriek. Altogether he was in a pitiable condition of nerves and weakness. It was the loss of Pascaline, of course; there had been no further news of her, and now he feared the worst.

So he huddled on a bench, just below the dock where stood the prisoner, and in front of the dais where sat the Judge. He wore a black suit which made him look thinner than ever, and a black tie which gave his face an air of unwonted severity. It was red to the point of rawness; his eyes were heavily underscored, and their tired lids rose to reveal a glassy stare. To cover his nervous tension, he fumbled with his monocle. Yet in his neat black and dressed with his usual care, he was a notable figure in the Court.

Others there were, equally notable; but the most conspicuous were the President of the Court and the prisoner at the bar. Peter could not see Ragon except by craning backwards. His sense of delicacy prevented him from doing this, but from a momentary glimpse he had a definite picture of the man. Old Ragon was standing lean and straight between two stoutish warders whose ruddy faces contrasted with his pale one. The man's queer grey eyes were stern

and bitter, his mouth set scornfully, his whole look savagely defiant.

But the chief personage of the Court was its President, Hector de Marsac. By his mere physical presence he seemed to dominate. Beside him his fellow judges looked negligible and insignificant. There was Monsieur Potel to his left, a small wizened man whom even a large imperial could not make impressive; and Monsieur Chabot to his right, a stout red-faced man, whose robes distorted rather than dignified him. But de Marsac himself was a worthy representative of the majesty of the law. Here was an ideal Judge, almost Olympian in his aloofness. Austere and impartial, he sat there as if on the throne of probity and honour.

As Peter watched de Marsac, it was as if he saw him in a new light. How strange to imagine that this was the man who had been his guest and clasped his hand in genial friendship. De Marsac now seemed so exalted, so unapproachable. His head, held almost haughtily, looked finely intellectual; his brows were knitted in concentration; the light in his eyes was more piercing than ever. That high-bridged nose with its flare of nostril gave him an imperious air which the disdainful droop of his lips intensified. Here was a brilliant aristocrat, playing his part in a democratic day, but despising bitterly his rôle. Here was an ambitious Royalist bowing to the mob but mocking them in the very act. Here was a Judge so far lifted above the others that he looked down on them with arrogance and disdain.

Yet, Peter imagined, de Marsac seemed pale and worn. He even seemed to be suffering under a tremendous strain. Was he too tortured by the thought of the missing girl? Sometimes he leaned forward, his eyes sombrely fixed, as if he had for a moment forgotten the Court. On one of these occasions, he looked down at Peter and flashed his sympathy.

Peter looked round the gloomy court-room with its dark panelling, its trappings and inscriptions. The public gallery curved round, and on the right, in front of all the

spectators stood the massive figure of the Abbé Grégoire. The arms of the priest were folded, his blue-black chin sunk on his chest. He, too, by his mere mass and his clerical garb, was an imposing figure. His face was grim and gloomy, and he followed the proceedings with an attention that seemed to leave him unconscious of everything else.

Why, Peter wondered, had he not given his testimony? All the witnesses had been called and the Abbé had not been among them. It was now the closing day of the trial, but only to-day had the Abbé appeared.

He had promised to go into the witness box;—what had happened to change his intentions? Or had he ever really meant to testify? The case for the defence had been closed; it only remained for the advocates to make their closing speeches, for the jury to give their verdict, for the Judge to pass sentence. Peter felt a rage of indignation against this false Abbé who had tricked him.

Then, looking to the opposite side of the gallery, he saw another face that made him stare with amazement. Surely he was not dreaming? The dark whiskers were gone, but it was the yellow, horselike countenance of Doctor Chavas. He could not mistake that long upper lip, that pendulous nose, that jutting chin. No, though the face was framed in a high fur collar, Peter felt certain it was the doctor.

What could the man be wanting here? It was the first time he, too, had appeared. Had they come like satyrs to gloat over the sentence of the man they believed to be innocent? Were they both connoisseurs in cruelty? It was inconceivable.

But Peter was shaken with still graver doubts. Where was Spirelli? Since the first day of the trial when he and Spirelli had given their testimony, Spirelli had disappeared. He had told Peter he would return later, in any case before the close. He had put Peter in possession of certain facts and then had vanished—to collect fresh facts no doubt.

And now, behold, the close was at hand and no Spirelli.

What could have happened to him? Peter felt he could do nothing without the detective. As he waited in a fever of impatience, it seemed to him as if he were in the midst of a devilish conspiracy of which he himself was the victim.

The trial had gone hard for Ragon. The examining magistrate had been unable to make anything of him; and more than anything else it was this obstinate silence that told against him. Yet the facts were in themselves enough to condemn him. The evidence of Peter and Spirelli was conclusive. Although Ragon was being tried for the killing of Machard, the assumption was that he was guilty of the whole series of crimes.

There was, of course, the question of an accomplice. Peter had been asked pointedly if he had not seen anyone else in the grounds, but he had been obliged to reply in the negative. The blow had been dealt with some sort of bludgeon of which no trace had been found; but though this was a strong point in Ragon's favour, it could not be expected to overwhelm the minds of a jury. Two doctors had been called. One, for the defence, tried by the reading of extracts from medical books to prove the prisoner insane. The other, for the prosecution, expressed the view that all men were more or less insane, but the prisoner little more so than his fellows.

The advocate for the defence enlarged on the simple harmless character of the prisoner and his blameless life in Auberon, calling witnesses in his favour; but the Procurer General retorted by bringing up his violent past with his conviction and sentence to forced labour. Thus the weight of evidence always went against him, and above all was the fact that he was caught red-handed beside the body.

Peter listened, only half hearing. Where was Spirelli? He felt tangled up in a mesh of complexity from which only Spirelli could extricate him. There was something he must do and do it quickly. But he put off the doing of it, because Spirelli had promised to do it,—could do it ever so much

better. His mind was all a stupid muddle, and his heart was thumping with sudden checks that made him gasp. There were blood-swishes in his brain. He was going to have a *crise* again. He felt it coming.

From his pocket he fished a flask of brandy and, covering it with his handkerchief, took a gulp. No one noticed him. All were watching the President as he summed up and addressed the jury. All eyes were on the tall fine man who wore his robes with a dignity that was almost regal. The face of de Marsac was impressive in its austerity. His rich voice was grave and solemn. In his stern serenity he seemed to embody all the majesty of the law.

His summing up was a model of logic and lucidity, yet Peter heard it like a man in a dream. A net seemed closing round him, strangling him. Oh, if he could only break out of it! He despaired of Spirelli now. The fellow had thrown him down. If anything was to be done to save this man in the dock, he, Peter, must do it. There! The jury were filing out. He had an idea they would not take long.

He looked round the Court. For a moment the strain had relaxed and there was a buzz of conversation. The President sat in his stern aloofness, while his two colleagues talked at his side. The reporters rustled their papers and sharpened their pencils. The lawyers, who had so lately fought and wrangled, now exchanged witticisms. Only the man whose life was at stake was unchanged. Impassive he stood, still and scornful as a blade. Doctor Chavas and the Abbé Grégoire were staring at each other across the well of the court. Oh Spirelli! Spirelli! . . . Ha! the jury were filing back.

Peter felt a great heaviness, as if all his inside was lined with lead. He gulped down more brandy, till his stomach was like a furnace. Then it was as if a stiletto suddenly pierced his heart. He felt he could not rise; his legs were like jelly. A neighbour looked at him in a queer way.

"Feeling sick, Monsieur?"

"No, all right. See! The verdict . . ."

The foreman of the jury, a dusty-bearded man, came forward. A great silence had fallen on the court. All eyes were bent on that common little fellow, all ears strained to catch his words. Then, in a squeaky voice that trembled a little, he said:

"Guilty."

What else he was saying didn't matter. All eyes were turned to the man in the dock. But surely of them all he was the most unmoved. In his composure there was something compassionate, as if his impending fate had exalted him. The Black Angel had chosen him, and he would soon be wiser than them all.

But from the prisoner all eyes turned to the Judge. De Marsac took a sip of water from a glass, then he rose to his commanding height. With lofty bearing he faced the court. For a moment a look of infinite sadness, even of pity, seemed to pass over his face, leaving it very gentle. . . . The great moment had come. De Marsac was going to pronounce the sentence of death.

Then Peter roused to action. Something seemed to be impelling him, some force stronger than his will. He found himself getting unsteadily to his feet. Now he was moving forward, making his way to the front of the court. At first, so intent were they, no one noticed him; so that he reached the three steps at the foot of the dais without arousing any attention. Was he going crazy? He stumbled a little; but now he was swaying in the front of the Court, like a man in a delirium. Then he gave a choking cry, and at that all eyes were on him.

And this is what they saw:

A thin little man in black made a tiger leap towards the President of the Court, and, pointing straight at him, said in a loud, clear voice:

"That man in the dock is innocent. You who are going to

sentence him to death, you, Hector de Marsac, Supreme Judge of this Court, you are the true murderer."

Then the little man reeled round and, with another gasping cry, collapsed in a heap on the steps below.

CHAPTER NINE

SENSATION ON SENSATION

For a long moment no one moved. Surprise held them spellbound and it was de Marsac himself who was the first to recover.

He had received the astounding accusation with a stare in which were mingled horror and amazement. For an instant he looked like a man in a daze. Could he believe his ears? Had Peter gone mad? Then his eyes flashed with scorn and anger and he made a step forward as if he would throw down his accuser. But Peter had already fallen.

Shouts from the court, cries of anger, of indignation. "A lunatic!" . . . "Shameful!" . . . "Arrest him!" The Judges sprang to the side of their President, but with a gesture de Marsac checked them. Lightning-like he grasped the situation and, superb in his dignity, he dominated the scene.

"Silence!" he cried in ringing tones. "Is there a doctor in court?"

The medical man who had declared that all the world was mildly mad came forward.

"Please see to him," said de Marsac, pointing to Peter. Then, holding up his hand, he went on: "I beg that the Court will take no more thought of this painful interruption, more painful to me than I can express. This gentleman who has just confronted me with an accusation so amazing, so monstrous it is almost incredible, is a personal friend of mine.

It is then as a man and not as President of this Court I wish to speak. My poor friend has lately suffered a terrible loss and evidently it has affected his reason. He also suffers from a weakness of the heart, which no doubt has contributed to bring him to this pass. I beg, then, for this distracted and misguided man the mercy and indulgence of the Court whose dignity he has so sadly outraged. He has had an attack of his malady; he is very sick; he may be dying, if not already dead."

At these words there was a great hush. The face of de Marsac was gentle, even pitying. "How is he, Doctor?" he demanded.

"Not dead. A syncope due to defective heart action."

"Is his state dangerous?"

"Very, I should say."

"Please have him taken away. Do everything you can to save him."

Two attendants hurried forward to help the Doctor; but before they could lift the limp form on the steps, a new voice startled the Court. Every head turned in the direction of the sound. It was a harsh, grating voice, and it came from one end of the public gallery.

"I, too, accuse that man of the foul crime of murder."

And to their amazement they saw that it was the Abbé Grégoire. He was in a state of violent agitation. His hands, trembling with passion, were outstretched towards de Marsac, and his large coarse face was distorted. Three men were trying to restrain him, but he seemed to have lost his senses. As he struggled with them, his eyes flamed like those of a madman, while a kind of lather flecked his sensual lips. Then his voice rose to a raucous shriek.

"I accuse the President of this Court," he cried, "of crimes unutterable. I accuse him of the assassinations of Castel Blanc. Behold in that man the modern prototype of Gilles de Rais, the Devil Duke of Brittany . . ."

He was raving on, but his further words were drowned in

a roar of rage and resentment. Cries of execration rose against him from all sides. Rough hands seized him, strong arms pinioned him. "A veritable madman," shrieked a voice. "A dangerous lunatic," cried another. "Arrest him!" shrilled the thin Judge. "Secure him!" roared the fat one. Only de Marsac remained calm.

And now the whole place was in an uproar. The Gallic temperament in all its extravagance was aroused. One realized the Latin lack of restraint that can turn a Chamber of Deputies into a bear-garden. There was no longer any attempt at decorum. The majesty of the law had become a mockery, and the only man who seemed to keep his head was de Marsac himself.

"Silence!" he cried again. His voice, so rich, so resolute, rang out above the tumult and, like magic, it ceased. All eyes were turned to the Judge, the victim of this dastardly attack. "Let us listen to him," they cried. "Let us hear him denounce this second madman. Silence for Monsieur le Président."

De Marsac stepped forward with a gesture of noble disdain. He knew his power. He knew he could sway this throng, rouse it to passionate indignation, melt it to sympathy. De Marsac, sure of himself, contemptuous of his infamous accusers, was going to speak . . . But before he could open his lips there came a *third* voice. It was clear and penetrating. It seemed to cut across the court like a razor-blade. It arrested everyone, so that each word of the measured utterance went home.

"I am," it began, "the Doctor Chavas, well known in the medical profession, and I wish to associate myself with the Abbé Grégoire as an accuser. Here in this Court, with all due respect for its sanctity, solemnly and deliberately, I *do accuse Monsieur Hector de Marsac, its President, of the murder of Angèle Ragon.*"

At these words, so impressively delivered, the sensation was overwhelming. Everyone turned to stare at the little

man in the fur coat. But for a moment only. There was a distraction, a violent one. It was old Ragon himself. It seemed as if the man had been stung to life. He was fighting madly with his warders, his face convulsed with hate, his grey eyes murderous.

"I knew it," he shrieked. "My girl was slain. Vengeance on the man who killed her. I call to God for vengeance."

But strong arms overpowered him and a rough hand covered his mouth. Again there was silence, and this time de Marsac was able to make himself heard.

"I suspend the Court," he cried, his eyes flashing. "Ushers, clear the building."

"First, arrest those two men," shouted the Judges in unison.

There were murmurs from the public gallery, protestations, even resistance. These people had little respect for Judges and Presidents. They were a critical race, inclined to cynicism, with a strong sense of the dramatic. And what they had been witnessing was a drama without parallel. For poignancy and passion it rivalled any piece at the Porte Saint Martin. They were intrigued, agonizingly so; they had been worked up and now they were to be cheated of the *dénouement*. Never did public leave a place so unwillingly. They rumbled and grumbled; they retreated rebelliously, almost forced to go by the irate ushers. Only Doctor Chavas and the Père Grégoire, guarded by gendarmes, kept their places.

"You, gentlemen of the Press, may remain," decided de Marsac. "Then, we may probe this affair to the bottom."

As he resumed his seat, his face was very stern, very grave. Not for a moment had he lost his poise. He was serene, scornful. Even the cynical pressmen were sympathetic. When the court was clear he rose again and, with ringing voice and flashing eyes, he addressed those that remained:

"I speak first of all as President of the Court. Its dignity has been outraged and through it the dignity of the Law

which I represent. For that contempt of court, gross beyond all experience, I hold these two men under arrest."

He paused a moment; then with a change of tone he went on:

"And now I speak as one of yourselves—as a man. I have been accused in the most astounding way of the foulest crimes. Indeed I can scarcely believe such charges have made by men responsible for their actions. To help you to realize how incomprehensible, how fantastic they are, I would like to point out that in every case when one of these crimes occurred, I was in another part of the country. The first I heard of them was reading of them in the papers."

His voice broke as he continued: "Gentlemen, for me this is a bitter and humiliating moment. Indeed if it were not for the grim reality of my accusers I would believe I was in a dream. I cannot speak without emotion; but before I go any further I demand that each of these men will explain before you what they mean by the words you have heard them utter."

As he finished there was a murmur of sympathy. Then, again silence. Pressmen, clerks, ushers, all were looking with indignation at the men under arrest. All were waiting for them to speak. Peter lay on the steps, his head resting on the knee of the doctor who was too fascinated to move.

Doctor Chavas and the Abbé Grégoire stood rigid in their places. They looked across the court at each other as if at a loss. The silence was long drawn out. It seemed as if it were being stretched to the point where it would snap in hysteria. But quite suddenly it was broken. There was a hammering on the door to the right of the court, the furious pounding of a fist. Then came a voice, high, imperative:

"Open! In the name of Justice, let me in."

And with that the door was flung wide and a man stood there.

It was Spirelli.

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As he paused for a moment in the open doorway, the detective seemed to take in the scene. His face, unusually white, was made grimmer by the scar that seemed to grow raw and angry when he was excited. His tall figure was slack with weariness, but his deep-set eyes had a glow of eagerness no amount of fatigue could quench. Every gaze was turned to him as he made his way to the front of the court.

"Explain this intrusion," snapped the thin Judge.

"I will," said Spirelli in his metallic tones. "I beg to be pardoned, but there was no time to lose. I have just heard of the infamous accusation that has been launched against our honoured President, and I am here to declare that it is false, absolutely false."

They were all on their feet now, staring at Spirelli. He paused to give effect to his words. Then he went on impressively:

"It is false, I repeat: false, because I have arrested the real assassin."

Even the two Judges started. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed, all stared at Spirelli. A breathless silence, then:

"Where is he?" almost gasped the fat Judge.

"I hold him in custody. He is in the court below."

All were on their feet now. "Who is he?" cried someone, and on every face was written the same question. They were saturated with sensation, these people, yet the thrill of Spirelli's announcement stupefied them. The Mystery-Man, the assassin of assassins,—who was he? They were on the verge of a revelation eclipsing anything that had gone before.

"Produce him, then," cried the voice of the thin Judge.

"I will do so," said the detective gravely. "I will do so, but it is against my better judgment. It was against my judgment I brought him here at all."

Again he paused. "Why? Why?" from all sides.

"Because," answered Spirelli quietly, "the man is dying."

A heavy hush in the court, a profound hush that was

broken by a sudden groan. All eyes turned in the direction of the sound. To their amazement they saw it came from de Marsac. He had fallen forward, so that he sagged over his desk; and his gaze, strained in horror, was fixed on the man who had come to proclaim his innocence. Spirelli turned to him and in his eyes there was a look of pity.

"Will I bring him up, Monsieur le Président?" he said gently.

But de Marsac did not speak. He made a dry noise in his throat that might have meant anything. Then, with that same glassy stare, he nodded his head.

Once again the court waited. Peter lay with closed eyes. Doctor Chavas and the Abbé Grégoire seemed petrified. Between his guards old Ragon glared banefully.

But what was the matter with de Marsac? He was like a man crushed. All colour had gone out of his face; his jaw had fallen, his eyes were fixed beyond the court in a stare of tragic intensity. His hands clutched and unclutched convulsively. . . . Spirelli seemed to be taking a long time. . . .

Ah! he was coming. On the stone steps outside they could hear the sound of feet, accompanied by a dragging, scuffling noise. Then again the door was thrown open and the detective appeared.

But behind him walked two gendarmes supporting between them the form of a man.

CHAPTER TEN

WHO WAS THE MAN?

At the sight of the trailing figure, a shudder of horror seemed to go through the throng. The man's head had fallen on his chest and a tangle of hair obscured his face. All the clothing he wore was a white cotton shirt, breeches of cord-

uroy and canvas shoes. But the shirt was gummed to his chest by blood, while his body hung from the waist as if paralysed.

"Sit him down there," said Spirelli, pointing to a chair just below the dais. Gently the gendarmes lowered him to a reclining position, supporting him by his arms. His head still hung helplessly, his face hidden by that knotted hair.

Above was Monseieur de Marsac; below, the man with the blood-stained shirt; between them on the steps lay the limp body of Peter. Slowly Spirelli lifted up the drooping head, gently brushed back the tangled hair.

"See," he said gravely.

And everyone was craning to see. . . . Then from all came a gasp that was almost a groan. For the man's head now lolled back, and the clotted hair was thrown from his brow. Against the white of his face the lids of his closed eyes had a purplish look. His cheeks were sunken, and the thin beard could not hide the piteous droop of his lips.

Curious! That was the first impression of all who saw—Pity. The man might have been a monster, but now he was past all aid. Whatever his crimes, already he had the look of one whom death has purged of all evil. In his still face was nothing sinister, only the seal of suffering and a pathetic weariness. However he had sinned, it was as if he had in his closing moments gone back to the innocence of childhood.

Yes, that was the first feeling—pity. But swiftly another followed—stupefaction. The same question was on every lip, the same wonder in every eye. Who was this man the image of? Who? . . . Then, slowly, almost as if startled, every face turned to . . . de Marsac.

Good God! They were identical. There was the same high-bridged nose with that flair of nostril. The same mould of the face, the same lips and chin. It was as if another de Marsac, emaciated, brutalized, lay limp at the feet of the real de Marsac. The resemblance was shocking, yet none

could deny it. With one accord they waited for the President of the Court to speak.

De Marsac had risen. He was coming down the steps, but his feet dragged and his head drooped, almost as those of the man in the chair had done. He, too, seemed stricken, utterly oblivious to those about him. He put both arms round the neck of the unconscious man, looked fearfully into the marble face. There they stood, the man in robes of silk and the man in blood-crisped rags; the Judge and the Guilty, the man of culture and the brute; yet, for a moment, they looked so alike, it was difficult to tell them apart.

Then de Marsac raised his head and his face was tragic in its grief.

"Gentlemen," he said in a choking voice, "*this is my brother, my twin brother Lucien, who has been an imbecile from his birth.*"

A sound like a sigh came from the ring of men, murmurs of pity, of sympathy. Bending down, de Marsac kissed the upturned brow.

"Lucien!" he cried brokenly, "my poor brother, look at me, open your eyes."

There was no change in the still face. The pathetic lips were as quiet as if carved in stone. With tears raining down his cheeks, de Marsac turned to the second doctor who was at his elbow.

"Tell me, Monsieur, I implore you, tell me he isn't dying?"

"Ah no!" said the doctor, "he is already dead."

"Dead!" The horror rang in de Marsac's tone, and the grief in his face was painful to see.

"Yes, Monsieur. He probably died even as they brought him into court. He is wounded in two places, either of which might be fatal. It is a wonder he has lived so long."

De Marsac was like a man stunned. As if he were blind, his hand went out gropingly. The two Judges supported him to his seat. He sank into the high-backed chair, and his

head fell forward on his desk. Great sobs convulsed him.

"Remove the body," said one of the Judges. "Take it into the waiting-room. Also take that fellow there." He pointed to the inert form of Peter who, supported by an attendant, still lay with eyes closed. So the two bodies were carried out, that of the dead man and the man who had caused his death.

The representatives of the Press had been conferring together, and now one of them came forward. It was René Laval of the *Petit Parisien*, that dynamic young Jew with the crêpe-like hair and the mocking manner. He addressed de Marsac.

"I speak on behalf of my colleagues and myself. We wish to express our respectful sympathy for Monsieur the President in the great calamity that has come on him. We want to assure him that nothing of the painful scene we have witnessed will be reported in the columns of our journals. We regard it as an interlude too private and personal to be given to the public. There are sanctities of sorrow which even a journalist must respect. We will try to use the greatest tact and delicacy in dealing with to-day's proceedings, and will await further development without abandoning our attitude of restraint and discretion. Again we offer Monsieur the President our sentiments of condolence in his great grief."

And with this fine gesture, amid a murmur of applause, René Laval bowed low before the Court. Then de Marsac roused himself. As if with a great effort he rose. Leaning on his arms over his desk, he spoke.

"Ah! gentlemen, I thank you," he said brokenly; "but from this moment I cease to be Monsieur the President. I resign my functions to one of my colleagues. The trial will be resumed to-morrow, but I shall not be present. I will do everything I can to aid Justice in the clearing up of this dreadful mystery; but it is evident that even if my grief for my dead brother did not unfit me to take any fur-

ther part in the proceedings, my unhappy personal interest in the trial would now make it impossible for me to continue in the place I occupy. So here and now I resign the high office I have held, and with it my entire career."

He came from behind his desk and, with a gesture of great dignity, he went on:

"Look! I throw off my robes of office and stand before you as a simple citizen."

"And now," he said with an expression of unutterable sadness, "listen and I will tell you the story of my brother. . . . We were twins and he was the younger; but although we grew up physically alike, from his earliest youth he showed signs of an unbalanced mind. It was as if I had received all the endowment of intellect and left him empty. We could teach him nothing. He would sit for hours on the sea-shore, lifting handfuls of sand, letting them sift through his fingers and laughing softly to himself. Oh! the pathos of that laugh! It broke my mother's heart, and in the end it killed her."

De Marsac's voice choked with emotion, but with an effort he continued: "Later on he developed fits of epilepsy, and became at moments very violent. Although now grown to a man, he was still simple as a child, yet with paroxysms of mad fury. It was then we realized that he was really dangerous. The specialist from Paris advised us to confine him in an institution, indeed insisted on it, and we promised to do so. But when the time came, he was so childlike, so gentle, it was painful for us to part with him. And his attacks, though violent, were so short and at such long intervals. Sometimes he would go six months without one."

De Marsac paused to take a sip of water from the glass on his desk. He resumed:

"Most broken-hearted to lose him was his nurse. She had suckled him at her breast, and as she had lost her own child, he was like a son to her. How she pleaded with my father not to send him away! She would watch him night and day, she

swore, devote herself to him, try to control him in his passions. My father, with much misgiving, at last consented."

De Marsac raised his head proudly, and his dark-blue eyes looked round almost with challenge.

"I do not wish to throw any blame on my father. I would have done the same; and indeed I *did* the same. I stand here prepared to take all blame for what has happened. When my father died I continued to keep my brother at home. No one knew. On account of the dark shadow that had fallen on us, we had remained aloof from everyone. No one was allowed to approach the place, and our neighbours supposed that Lucien was in an asylum. Then, as the years went on, he became a memory, was indeed quite forgotten. In that old château with its vaults and thickly wooded grounds, Margot the nurse and Simeon her husband were able to care for my brother and keep his presence concealed."

Again de Marsac moistened his lips and went on in a calmer voice. "For the last ten years I have seen practically nothing of my brother, but I supposed that all was going well. When I came on my annual visit he was always quiet and well disposed. And my two servants assured me his fits were becoming less and less frequent. Perhaps they lied, fearing I would take him away. I was lulled to contentment, yet the responsibility is mine. I loved the poor boy and wanted to keep him at home. I did not realize he might be a danger to others. I cannot realize it yet, and for this reason I ask this gentleman to explain why he accused my dead brother of these atrocious and appalling crimes."

There was a deep sigh as de Marsac ceased. All eyes were turned on Spirelli. The Italian rose. He, too, was apparently moved.

"When the trial is resumed to-morrow," he said, "I will go into the witness box and give my testimony in full detail. I will produce witnesses and other evidence to support my charge. And while again expressing my deepest sympathy with Monsieur de Marsac, I want to say that all he has told

us only goes to support the supposition that the unknown assassin of Castel Blanc was his dead brother Lucien. But, first of all, I ask to be forgiven a suspicion which for a little I entertained. There was a time when, deceived by the likeness, and by circumstantial evidence, I now know to be absolutely false, there was a time, I say, when I believed that the guilty one was Monsieur de Marsac himself."

At this there were cries of indignation, but Spirelli went on steadily.

"I will tell you briefly what happened. We had been having, as you know, a nocturnal visitor. We supposed that this midnight marauder was responsible for the series of crimes and were on the lookout for him. Yet he always eluded us. Then, I discovered an underground passage by which he could enter the house."

There was a cry of astonishment from de Marsac. "An underground passage!"

"Yes, a tunnel leading from the grounds to the house. He evidently was in the habit of escaping from his two guardians when the wild fit seized him, and gaining entrance to the house by this concealed way. After that, I put a wolf trap in the passage, and attached it by a chain to a staple in the wall. Anyone coming along in the dark would be bound to be caught."

De Marsac seemed to feel faint. He sat down on his chair again and, raising with trembling hand the glass of water, he gulped a little."

"Then," went on Spirelli, "I was called to Paris on another trail, and the owner of the house was left there alone. He was sitting by the fire in the dining room; it was about midnight, when he saw a face regarding him through the window. It disappeared, but Monsieur MacBeth, who is a famous hunter of lions, concealed himself outside the house and waited. Soon again the figure returned and he opened fire. He then pursued the fugitive as far as the grounds of the château but there lost him."

With a gesture de Marsac interrupted. "But why did he fire so hastily? Why did he assume that poor crazed man staring through his window was the author of these crimes?"

"Perhaps he acted rashly. However, as I will show, his action was justified. When I returned, I took up the trail. But it was only yesterday, by the mark of blood, I was able to trace the wounded man to a little outhouse behind the château. It was apparently used as a dog-kennel, for there were two hunting spaniels there."

Spirelli looked questioningly at de Marsac. The latter nodded.

"Yes, my brother loved my two dogs. He used to play with them for hours and hours."

"Well, I found on the straw more traces of blood, but I also found something else."

Spirelli paused, and everyone craned forward to catch his words.

"I found concealed under the straw what seemed to be an iron mace, such as was used by knights in mediæval times. The nobbed head of this weapon was gummed with dried blood and hair. I think this hair can be proved to be identical with that of Inspector Marchard."

There was a sensation among his auditors. The detective went on: "I also found a key that fits the door of the pigeon-house, where there is the entrance to the underground passage. I will produce these in Court to-morrow."

De Marsac had buried his face in his hands. The audience seemed spellbound. In his metallic voice Spirelli continued:

"And now to come to the result of my further investigation. I unloosed the two dogs, hardly thinking they would aid me. I expected they would make for the château; but no, they turned away from it and, with whining cries and noses down, scented their way through the grounds and out into the fields. They were making straight for Castel Blanc, following a trail with yelps of eagerness. I came on

them circling round the old pigeon-tower. I went back to the house and got the chauffeur to accompany me. Together we entered the secret passage by the outlet under the house. Halfway in the tunnel we found the man we sought."

There was a cry from de Marsac, but inexorably Spirelli went on. "He was held by the steel trap and insensible. We released him and carried him up to the kitchen. His leg was broken at the ankle by the powerful spring. We succeeded in reviving him and for a little while his mind seemed quite lucid. Then and there I questioned him about the various murders. In a manner that was simple as that of a child he admitted them."

"Admitted them," groaned de Marsac, suddenly looking up.

"Yes. It was in the kitchen. He lay on a mattress propped against the wall. With me were Madame Marteau, the housekeeper, and Achille, the chauffeur, who will testify to every word I say."

"'Who are you?' I asked him first of all.

"'My name is Lucien de Marsac.'

"'What were you doing in the passage?'

"'I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill the man I saw through the window.'

"'But why did you want to kill him?'

"'I don't know. I just wanted to kill.'

"'Have you killed others?'

"'Yes. One in there.' He pointed to the scullery. 'I did not like his ear, so I cut it off and nailed it to the table. After that I gnawed his neck. I want to use my teeth when I kill. Always to bite.'

"'And who else did you kill?'

"'A big dark man upstairs. I hid in his room and struck him with a poker. I tore his leg.'

"'And were there any more?'

"He seemed to think with an effort. 'Yes,' he sighed,

‘there were two, an old woman and a young man. But it’s so long ago I can’t remember well.’

“‘And in the grounds one dark night, did you not kill a man?’

“‘Yes, a stout man. I crushed his head. I would have got my teeth in him too, but I was stopped. It’s strange, how I always want to bite when I kill.’

“Then he began to weep. ‘My dogs, I want my dogs. And Margot . . .’

“He had spoken with a naïve simplicity, and now he seemed to grow more childlike. He was crying bitterly, the tears running down his hollow cheeks.

“‘Margot, your boy wants you,’ he sobbed. ‘Take me home, Mother Margot. . . . My leg hurts so where the thing bit me. And I’m afraid, afraid. . . . Poor little Lucien. . . . Margot, take me. . . . I’m tired, tired. . . .’

“Then he shuddered violently, hiding his eyes. ‘It’s not my fault I did these things. A wicked spirit got into me. made me do them. I hate it but I’ve got to do what it tells me. Oh, Margot, Margot, come to me. I’m afraid, afraid. . . .’

“With that he cried just like a little child and in the midst of it he lost consciousness. I would have liked to let him rest, but time was pressing. I knew that it must be about the hour they were sentencing Ragon, so I lifted him in the car and brought him here.”

In a voice of sadness Spirelli finished, and the emotion that showed itself on his face was reflected in the features of those about him. Fresh looks of sympathy were directed to de Marsac. He had risen heavily. His face was twitching and, in a low tone, he said:

“After what I have heard, Gentlemen, you will forgive me if I leave you. To-morrow morning the police had better search my house for further evidence. I will be glad to assist them. This night I want to sit by the body of my dead brother.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HOUSE-BREAKERS

Spirelli hurried away to look for the body of Peter which had been carried to a room behind the Court. To his surprise he did not find it there, and on further investigation he discovered the owner of the body in his car, propped up with cushions. Peter's eyes were closed, but his lips opened.

"I'm supposed to be still unconscious," came from them. "Drive on slowly."

Spirelli instructed the chauffeur and took his place in the car. As soon as they were clear of the village Peter opened his eyes.

"How are you?" asked Spirelli anxiously.

"Better than I seem to be, by a damsite. In fact I've been putting it on. You see, I was carried away by the impulse of the moment. Got up and denounced poor de Marsac himself. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I thought what a bally ass I'd been. Nothing to do but to throw a fit. So I did. A topping one. Otherwise I'd have been immediately arrested for contempt of court, and there would have been an end to my present usefulness. I was feeling so rotten anyway that it was easy. I just let myself go, and even the doctor was fooled. I kept my eyes closed all the time, but I heard everything that went on."

"And what did you make of it?"

"Stupendous! My mind's in a whirl. That poor devil, de Marsac! It is a knock-out for him."

"Yes, it ends his career. But why did you make him the object of such a cruel suspicion? Why did you write his name on that piece of paper?"

"I'll explain from the beginning," said Peter. "You see, I've always had a prejudice against him. Perhaps it was because he wanted to take Pascaline away from me, and I

was afraid he would succeed. I think she liked him better than she thought she did. Of course, with you it was different. She was married to you. And she was applying for a divorce. I was never jealous of you. Besides, she hated you."

"Thanks for reminding me of it," said Spirelli sourly.

"Well, probably it was his *penchant* for her that put me against him; otherwise I am obliged to admit he was a splendid fellow. Anyway the first time my unworthy suspicions were aroused was one afternoon he invited us both to tea at the château. He was talking to Pascaline when I took up the tongs to put a fallen faggot back on the fire. They were of wrought iron, and the design was mediæval in character. I was admiring them when I was startled to find that the end of the handle was worked in a design of two twined serpents."

"Like the poker your valet was killed with?"

"Identical. I made sure before laying the thing down. Suspicion one. Then, one afternoon, de Marsac gave us some imitations of living actors, and I could not help thinking that the man must have the making of a magnificent actor himself."

"You mean that he could play a part in real life, as well as on the stage?"

"Precisely. Then I remember now, though it did not strike me at the time, that when Pascaline saw the face at the window she said it reminded her of someone, but she would not tell me who. She, too, was probably struck by the resemblance but, regarding it as too absurd, she put the idea out of her head. Another curious thing: when I visited the Abbé Grégoire and he showed me that engraving of Gilles de Rais, I was struck by its curious likeness to de Marsac. There was the same high-bridge nose and the same fine nostrils that flaired away. The thought flashed through my head that de Marsac was perhaps a modern reincarnation of the notorious Duke."

"Your imagination does you credit."

"Yes, but that also was too fantastic to be entertained, so I put it from me. The real suspicion came when I myself saw the face at the window. The likeness was no longer to be denied. It was the face of de Marsac I saw, a de Marsac playing the part of a bestial maniac. Then, when I followed the man I had shot at and traced him to the grounds of the château, all my suspicions seemed to crystallize into certainty."

"Humph!" snorted Spirelli. "So much for circumstantial evidence. It has helped to hang many an innocent man."

"And you," Peter went on somewhat maliciously. "What raised your infamous suspicions against this unfortunate man?"

"Ah! I had even less to go on than you," said Spirelli humbly. "Perhaps like you I was prejudiced. In any case I did not dream of suspecting him at all until a few days ago."

"When?"

"When I went down to Paris that last time to meet Doctor Chavas. Immediately he saw me, Chavas said to me: 'I've found out who was the lover of Angèle Ragon.'"

"Well?" I asked.

"The man who was then Procurer General at the Assize Court of the Seine, Maitre de Marsac."

"But are you sure?" I demanded.

"Yes, he still has an apartment here. I bribed the wife of his *concierge* and showed the photograph of Angèle. She admitted that the girl had stayed there with de Marsac."

"That's nothing against him," I told Chavas. "Naturally he wouldn't want people to know."

"But," he insisted. "It was her lover who killed her."

"That doesn't follow. Why should he?"

"I know he did."

"You can prove nothing."

"Not yet. But I will—soon."

"As I left Chavas, I had the idea that he was keeping something back; yet at the same time he had impressed me, so that my own suspicions turned to de Marsac. Nevertheless, when I wrote his name on that paper it was perhaps because he was uppermost in my thoughts. To tell the truth I was infernally tangled up."

"And what do you think now?"

"That Chavas was probably lying; that perhaps he himself killed the girl and is trying to fasten suspicion on another. . . . But all this does not matter. There is only one thing that matters."

"I know; to trace Pascaline."

"Yes. We've got to find her."

"Why didn't you ask the brother of de Marsac if he carried her off?"

"He lost consciousness before I could do so. Besides . . . I was afraid."

"I understand. But what do you think?"

"We have every reason to believe that he carried her off; however, I cannot let myself think that he harmed her. And yet . . ."

"Have you searched the well?" asked Peter, frightened.

"Yes, I have searched the well," answered Spirelli savagely.

"Painful as it was I did that, and I found nothing."

"Then he must have carried her further. What about the grounds of the château?"

"I have likewise searched the grounds of the château, every foot of them."

"And what about the château itself?"

"There! I believe you have the solution. We've got to search the château."

"The police are searching it to-morrow."

"We've got to search it to-night."

"Tell me," demanded Peter. "Did you never have a suspicion before you discovered the brother, that it was de Marsac himself who had carried off Pascaline?"

"He couldn't have done so. I know that on the evening it happened he was at a dinner in Rennes. I wish it had been de Marsac."

"Yes, I would have feared him less than his crazy brother. Well, we mustn't despair."

"No, I have never given up hope," said Spirelli. "I have a feeling she is not very far away. To-night we will search the château, and if she is there we will find her."

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Madame Marteau, whom the emotions of the day had rendered well nigh helpless, managed to scrape together a supper for them. They ate almost in silence. It was obvious that their thoughts ran in the same direction, and that not a pleasant one. Once indeed, Spirelli made a remark. "You remember that smell we felt in the rooms after our midnight visitor had made his escape?"

"Yes, a strong animal odour."

"It was simply 'dog'." No doubt that poor demented being used to spend his days playing with those two dogs, perhaps even sleeping with them. His clothes must have been impregnated with the smell."

"What I can't understand is how those two people who looked after him could allow him to escape. They must have had some suspicion of his nightly evasions."

"Why should they? Evidently he had great cunning. And how do we know they didn't know? Or at least suspected him? Wouldn't they naturally try to shield him? It seems to me they can tell a great deal, and if the police get them into the witness box, they won't be the least interesting of the witnesses."

"I fear for poor de Marsac. No doubt he'll be held responsible. He had made many enemies and they'll fall on him now like a pack of wolves. His future is compromised. And in spite of the *beau geste* of those press men, what happened yesterday will certainly leak out."

"Yes, they may hold back for a moment, but you bet they are sharpening their pencils for to-morrow's court."

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It was a nipping night of skyey jubilation. Each separate star sat in its allotted bit of heaven and twinkled with entire satisfaction.

Both men wore sneakers and carried brownings. Spirelli had a small electric torch, and his kit of burglar's tools.

"I feel as if I was back in the old profession," was his remark. "Mighty few houses I couldn't enter in the old days. But to-night I'm making a burglar of you too."

"Wouldn't it be better to go boldly to the couple and ask them to let us search the house?"

"My dear Sir, you don't know old Simeon. The very look of his face is enough. That man would never give us leave to search without the proper authority. Then, if there was anything to connect them with the disappearance of Pascaline, they would quickly conceal it. We are taking no chances. What we are doing is best."

Under their feet the grass was crisp with frost that glistened in the starlight, but the serried pines that defended the château were defiantly dark.

Spirelli unhooked a strand of wire that he had clipped on a former occasion, and they pushed their way through the gloom. There was no undergrowth as at Castel Blanc, only a soft carpet of powdered cones. Swiftly and silently they made their way, and in a few minutes they emerged from the grove in full view of the house.

"Here is where we must be careful," said the detective. "Two feet make less noise than four. If you don't mind I will make a round of the building alone."

On the edge of the pines Peter shivered. A shapeless shadow in the starlight, he saw Spirelli stealing around the château. Every window was dark and desolate. With its

sturdy towers and crenellated walls, the house seemed to squat amid its lawns like some survival from the dark ages. That tomblike stillness and blackness of mass gave it an abandoned and sinister aspect, so that as he looked, again Peter shivered.

In a few moments he was rejoined by Spirelli, who whispered: "I have made a round of the place. Everything is quiet. Come on."

Both men slipped softly out and stole over the starlit lawn.

"There are seven ways of entering a house," said Spirelli, "but it is preferable to go in by the door. And a side door is better than a main one. There is a door in one of the towers. Let us first try that."

It was in the tower nearest them, a small, stout door, set deeply in the wall. Spirelli regarded it grimly enough.

"A bit of a job here."

He began to unwrap his burgling kit. Then, as if by an afterthought, he turned the handle. To his surprise the door opened.

"What luck! Still I don't quite like it. It's too easy."

Noiselessly they entered and flashed the torch about. They were in a room nearly circular in shape. It seemed to be inhabited and had an air of rude comfort. To the right was a fire-place, to the left a barred window. The floor was covered with deer-skins. Beyond the window was a large bed, and over it a fur robe. Beyond the fire-place was a table and chair, and on the table stood a loaf of bread with a pitcher of milk.

In the wall that faced the doorway was another small door reached by three steps. After closing the outer one, Spirelli tried to open this door but could not.

"Bolted on the other side. We're not so lucky as I thought. I believe this is where the crazy brother lived. The outer door is left unfastened in case of his return; but the

inner one, giving entrance to the château, is closed. Evidently the old man and his wife don't know what's happened to their charge."

On pegs along the wall clothes were hanging. Spirelli examined them.

"These must be his. Rough and strong. Ha! what's this?"

It was a curious garment, shaped like a bathing suit and made of grey fur.

"Looks like wolf-skin," he muttered.

There was a hood which he examined with a puzzled air. "See," he said after a moment, "it's a wolf's head, prepared to represent the original. It even has imitation eyes. . . . *Sapristi!*"

Accidentally he had touched a button attached to the breast of the costume. To their amazement the eyes flamed into light.

"More interesting still. This is the suit in which he used to masquerade. Look! there's a small battery set in the skull with an incandescent globe. Most ingenious! I wonder who was responsible for a toy like that? Master Lucien certainly had a gruesome way of amusing himself. . . . Quick! Someone's coming. Hide!"

Spirelli flung the wolf-skin on the hook, and the two men looked for a place to conceal themselves. The only way seemed to be to crouch down between the bed and the wall. They made themselves as small as possible, and listened to the sound of approaching footsteps.

In a moment the door in the wall was opened and a man holding a candle appeared. The light illumined his grim old face, grey whiskered and saffron in colour. Holding the candle up to see that the bed had not been disarranged, he descended the steps. Then, with a sigh, he looked at the untouched bread and milk.

"Not back yet," he muttered. "Whatever can happened to him? Never before has he been away so long."

They heard his feet in heavy clogs clump to the outer door. Again that mutter: "I wonder if he's not with the dogs. I'd better go and see."

Then they heard the outer door open and close and, peering out, they found he was gone.

"Now's the time to get into the house," said Spirelli eagerly. "That was old Simeon."

Slipping out of their hiding place, they crept up the steps. By the light of the torch they could see they were in a small antechamber which had once been used as a linen room. At its far end was a door which Spirelli opened. Passing through it they found themselves in the great hall of the château.

"I remember this hall from my previous visit," whispered Peter. "It's lit by a big window behind the grand staircase."

Indeed they could see the outline of the window, through which diffused a faint starlight, just enough to show the stairs sweeping round on either side.

"You know the plan of the house, then?"

"A little. The stairs mount to corridors that lead to the bedrooms. On the other side of the hall is a vestibule leading to the front door."

He was going on to describe the further arrangement of the rooms when Spirelli grasped him by the arm.

"Hist! there's someone over there, standing at the foot of the stairway."

Peter looked and saw what seemed to be the erect shadow of a man. Then he remembered: "No, it's only a suit of armour. I've seen it before."

There were indeed two suits of armour, standing on each side of the grand staircase. Spirelli was reassured.

"Tell me more about the house," he questioned.

"The room that opens on the hall to the right of the vestibule is a sort of lounge. We had tea there. On the other side is the dining room."

"She's not likely to be in either of these. Let us search the rooms upstairs."

"It all seems so hopeless."

"Come on. Never say die. Wait! Here comes old Simeon again. Lie down."

They had mounted the stairway as far as the landing under the window. There in the shadow they were invisible. They could hear the old man clumping across the hall. When he reached the foot of the stairs he seemed to hesitate as if he were listening. If he had mounted a dozen steps he would have fallen over them. But seemingly satisfied, he opened a door at the back of the hall and disappeared. They heard his *sabots* descending the stone steps to the basement.

"Now the coast is clear," said Spirelli, "we'll search the bedrooms."

They were going softly up the branch of the stairway to the right when they stopped with one accord.

From the hall directly below them they heard a muffled moan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SECRET POWER

In a moment they were at the foot of the stairs.

"It came from there," said Spirelli, pointing to the side of the hall opposite to where they had entered.

Exploring the wall, they discovered a door and opened it quietly. They saw a small room similar to the linen room on the other side. On a rack were ranged half a dozen guns, and on the panelled walls hung weapons of a bygone age.

"The armoury," suggested Peter.

At one side of this room was a cupboard. In its capacious interior clothes were arranged on pegs—overcoats, shooting suits, flannels.

“Evidently now used as a dressing-room. Hark!”

Again that hollow moan. It seemed to come from somewhere beyond, and a flash of light on the further wall revealed a door flush with the panelling. They advanced cautiously.

“It’s from there,” Peter whispered. “Look! There’s a faint light between the floor and the door.”

Spirelli turned the handle slowly. “Locked!”

He knocked softly but there was no reply. “Well, I’ll have to force it. I must see what’s in here. Keep a watch.”

Peter tiptoed to the door leading to the hall. Spirelli had a skeleton key and several pick-locks. He was experimenting with the latter when he turned to find his companion at his elbow.

“There’s someone at the front entrance,” declared Peter with some excitement.

Spirelli withdrew his pick-lock and they both peered into the hall. They could hear the main door being opened, then steps, then a hushed voice:

“This way. . . . Wait a moment. Let me light up.”

On each side of the grand staircase, where the balustrade curved round, were mediæval lanterns. These glowed into pale being; then the subdued voice went on:

“Advance again. Lay him on that table in the centre of the hall.”

Slow, steady steps; a sound as of a heavy object being laid carefully on the table; a few mutterings, a waiting silence.

“You may go now,” said the solemn voice. “I will reward you to-morrow. In the meantime, thank you.”

A low murmur: “*Merci. Bonne nuit, Monsieur.*”

The steps retreated; there was the sound of the front door being shut, then slowly the man who had spoken returned. But now there was another voice. It was old Simeon, who on hearing the noise had mounted hastily from the basement.

"Ah, Master, it's you," he cried eagerly. "I'm so glad you have returned."

"Yes," said de Marsac wearily. "I have come back."

"I have been so anxious about Master Lucien. He has been away since the night before last. I have searched everywhere for him. Not a trace. Yes, one . . . I found stains of blood, much blood, in the dog-kennel. I fear something's happened to him."

"How is Margot?" demanded de Marsac abruptly.

"Very ill, Monsieur. For her too I am anxious. She has not been quite lucid these last few hours. I was thinking even of seeking a doctor. She cries all the time for Master Lucien. If only he would return it would soothe her."

"He *has* returned. He is here now."

"Where" cried Simeon, startled.

"Come here."

In the dim light of the lanterns, Peter could see the tall figure of de Marsac and the bent one of old Simeon. The two approached the table on which he could now make out a long black shape. From old Simeon burst a gasping cry.

"He's not . . . dead?"

"Yes, I'm bringing home my brother—dead. A sad end, Simeon, but perhaps it's just as well."

There was a long silence. Peter could see the old man standing with head bowed. De Marsac paced slowly up and down.

Suddenly old Simeon began to cry. "Oh my poor Lucien! How can I tell Margot? It will kill her. Already she fears something. I could scarce keep her quiet a minute ago. She wanted to get up, to search for him herself. She seemed to know something had happened to him. What was it? Tell me, Monsieur."

"He was shot in the grounds of Castel Blanc."

"Shot! Ah! Mon Dieu! I feared it would come to that. We should never have let him out. But he was so

gentle when the fit was not on him, it was hard to keep him always confined."

"Was he excited when you saw him last?"

"Yes. Ever since he came back carrying the girl."

"The *girl*! What girl?"

"Is it possible Monsieur doesn't know? I telegraphed to Paris, Monsieur, to your Club."

"I never called there."

"It's the young demoiselle of Castel Blanc, Monsieur. Master Lucien arrived with her in the early dawn. He was carrying her gently, fondling her and kissing her hair. He was in one of his childlike moods. He said he had brought home someone to play with. She was unconscious. It was when we took her away from him he began to get excited. Ah! if Monsieur had only known . . ."

De Marsac seemed stupefied. Peter heard his voice quick with anxiety.

"But where is she? Is she safe?"

"Quite, Monsieur, and well cared for. When she recovered consciousness she did not know what had happened. She spoke about a terrible face in the mirror and a hand over her mouth. She asked where she was. My wife tried to soothe her. She wanted to return to Castel Blanc, but we would not let her."

"Good Heavens! Why?"

"We were afraid, Monsieur. The truth would have come out about Lucien. We wanted to see you before we let her go. You could have arranged things. They are your friends. They would keep silent so that all the world would not know our secret. Perhaps we did wrong, but we were quite distracted. We are entirely responsible, but perhaps when she knows all Mademoiselle will forgive us."

"Where is she?"

"In the library. We had to lock the door. She begged us at least to send some sort of message to let her uncle

know she was safe. She worried more about him than about herself. She pleaded, she threatened; then she seemed to resign herself. For the first day my wife took in her food, but since Margot has been so sick I have attended to her. Believe me, Monsieur, she is none the worse for her adventure."

"And she is there now?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Give me the key. I will see what I can do. What a business! You have done wrong, Simeon. No matter what it cost you should have let her uncle know. God knows enough harm has been done by our effort to keep my brother with us . . ."

It was with a heavy sigh de Marsac took the key from the old man and crossed to where Peter and Spirelli were listening. They had just time to retreat. Peter felt Spirelli drag him into the cupboard where the clothes were. Once in there and the cupboard door shut the detective whispered.

"We'll wait and hear a little more before we declare ourselves. I wanted to find out about Lucien. A fool who could use chloroform and amuse himself with electric toys might not be such a fool after all."

"At least we know Pascaline is safe," sighed Peter. "Oh, what a relief! I feel a new man."

They heard de Marsac's heavy footfall. The door was opened and he was in the room beside them. Then came the sound of a key squeaking in a lock. Through a chink in the cupboard they could see light. There was a startled exclamation:

"You!"

"Yes, my poor child, it is I. Ah! I am *désolé*. How can I ever atone for this? My fools of servants! How can you ever forgive me for what they have done? But perhaps when I have explained everything you may forgive even them. . . . You have not been harmed?"

"No, but I've been horribly frightened. And worried, so

worried. Not for myself, for Uncle Peter. It's his heart, you know. . . ."

"Well, you'll soon be with him."

("Sooner than you think," muttered Peter in the cupboard.)

"I'll take you to him," went on de Marsac; "but first hear my story. Perhaps you will pity me a little, for I am dazed with grief and horror. Mademoiselle the assassin of Castel Blanc has been discovered."

"And he is . . . who?"

"My brother."

"Your brother!"

"Alas, yes. You didn't know I had one. We kept it secret. He is my twin brother and he has been insane ever since I can remember. At moments we would let him out a little in the garden. We allowed no one to enter the grounds, so that he was never seen. But it seems he used to break away sometimes. My two servants knew of this and they did not tell me. Whether they suspected him of the crimes, I know not; but on my rare visits I once or twice imagined that they were sharing some dreadful secret. . . . It was my brother carried you off—how, I know not. I have only just learned you were here, for it is my first return home since a week. I was terribly distressed at your disappearance and visited your uncle to get some news. . . . What will he think when he learns you were in my house all the time!"

"How is my uncle?"

"I regret I do not know. He fainted at the trial."

"You must take me to him at once, Monsieur de Marsac."

"I will, Mademoiselle; but first I want to ask you, since you are none the worse, to forgive my poor brother. He didn't know what he was doing."

"Where is your brother?"

"Dead. . . . I am all that remains of a once great family; and my life, too, is finished, as far as this country is concerned. But I am in the flower of my manhood. Ambition

still burns in me. My powers are unimpaired. I am going to a new land to begin afresh. In Canada, in Quebec where my own tongue is spoken, I will rise higher than ever. I will be a political power. I feel that a bitter past will be forgotten in the glow of a brilliant future. . . . And now, Mademoiselle, I want to ask you if you will not share that future with me. Before I take you to your uncle, will you not listen to my pleading? Will you not promise to be my wife."

Opening the door of the cupboard a little, Spirelli and Peter leaned forward so that they could hear. The voice of Pascaline was low and faltering.

"But you know I am already married."

"But you are getting a divorce."

"Yes—that is . . . if Uncle Peter wants to marry me."

"But . . . you can't marry your uncle."

"He is only my adopted uncle. Yes, I can marry him."

In the silence that followed, the listeners pictured the amazement of de Marsac. Then:

"But if he does not wish to marry you?"

"In that case I don't think I'll get a divorce at all."

"But—don't you hate your husband?"

"I used to think so. Now I wonder. . . ."

Peter felt Spirelli tightly gripping his arm. The two men were half outside the cupboard.

"Then, do you *love* your husband?"

"Sometimes I think I do. A little bit."

Peter and Spirelli crawled to the closed door of the room from which came the voices. After a moment they heard de Marsac speak.

"Mademoiselle, let me look into your eyes."

"Why?"

"You're not afraid, are you?"

"No. . . . All right."

"Let me look steadily into your eyes. I want to see if I can see there the truth."

"Look then."

There was a long silence. It seemed as if whole minutes of absolute quietness went by. The two men held their breath. In the faint light from the door, Peter saw Spirelli looking at him wonderingly. Then it seemed as if they heard Pascaline sigh, and again de Marsac spoke. His voice was singularly tense and vibrant.

"Pascaline, listen to me."

"I'm listening." Her tone was strangely flat and colourless.

"You don't love your husband," said de Marsac.

A silence; then that grim voice again, driving home every word:

"You—don't—love—your—husband."

"No-o."

"Repeat after me: 'I don't love my husband.' "

". . . I don't love my husband."

"Remember that is the truth as I see it in your eyes. I tell you the truth, I, who know you better than you know yourself."

"Good God! What's the man doing?" gasped Peter. Again they strained listening ears. They heard:

"You love no one, no one but me, Hector de Marsac. That is also the truth. That, too, repeat after me."

"I love no one, no one but you, Hector de Marsac."

"What you have said is the only truth. It now sinks to the bottom of your consciousness. It will never be stilled, that voice of Truth."

There was another silence, then de Marsac went on in the same tense, relentless tone:

"And now repeat after me, letting it sink into you: 'I will marry you, Hector de Marsac.' "

The words came as if each were being dragged out of the girl.

"I will marry you, Hector de Marsac."

"Remember that is a promise that binds you always."

Wherever I am I can call for you and you will come. You will follow me to the four corners of the world, for I am your Master now and always . . .”

But before he could say another word Spirelli had crashed open the door and was in the room.

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“What does this mean?” cried de Marsac.

He had been standing with his back to the door, but he spun round and faced them.

“What does *this* mean?” snarled Spirelli. He was pale as paper and, with trembling hand, he pointed to Pascaline.

“Why have you broken into my house?” demanded de Marsac.

Spirelli laughed bitterly. “It seems we had good reason to break in.”

Pascaline had flown to the arms of Peter. She was in a daze, and there was a queer look in her eyes, a baffled, wondering look. Suddenly de Marsac grew calm.

“Forgive me, I forget myself. You are right. For a moment I was startled. I only wished to have the pleasure of restoring Mademoiselle to you with my own hands. She will tell you all that you do not already know. Her abduction was the last mad act of my dead brother, one more of his misdeeds added to my already crushing burden, Thank Heaven, though, Mademoiselle is unharmed. But for all the anxiety and distress you have suffered I can only express my deepest sorrow.”

“A moment, Monsieur,” broke in Spirelli. “If you will permit me I should like to ask you one or two questions.”

“Ask on,” said de Marsac sadly.

But before Spirelli could begin there was a noise as of an altercation in the house beyond. De Marsac started and ran into the hall. They followed.

By the light of the two lanterns they saw old Simeon

struggling with his wife. A dressing-gown was thrown over her night-robe, and her bare feet were thrust into slippers. Her grey hair hung around her withered face, so fine in its fleshless austerity. But her eyes were fierce with fever.

"My boy! My boy!" she wailed, as Simeon sought to restrain her. "Lucien! I believe he's here and he wants me. Take me to my boy. . . ."

"Come, come, Margot," begged old Simeon. "There are gentlemen here. Don't make a scene now. Come back to your bed."

"Who are these people? Have they brought me back my poor sick boy? Ah! it's the master."

She broke from Simeon and caught de Marsac by the hand. He sought to soothe her.

"It's all right, Mother Margot. Lucien's all right. You'll see him very soon."

"Is it true what you say, Monsieur? Will I really see him soon? You know what he is to me. He took the place of my own child who died, and I suckled him at these two breasts, for your mother had not enough milk for both. He has been like my own boy, and dearer to me because he was so helpless."

"Yes, yes. Come now," coaxed de Marsac. Tears were running down old Simeon's cheeks.

"He loved me like a mother. He was always like a child, just a child to me."

"A little patience, Mother Margot."

"Yes, I'll try to be patient. He'll come back. I'm going now. I'm . . ."

Her eyes fell on the covered form on the hall table. Old Simeon and de Marsac were holding her arms when, with sudden strength, she wrenched herself free. They tried to prevent her but it was too late. They could only watch her as she went over to the body. She went slowly, as if drawn

by a magnet, as if she feared to look. Slowly, too, she lifted a corner of the blanket; then her shriek of agony rang out.

She had thrown off the cover and was holding Lucien in her arms; kissing his cold cheek, calling him in endearing terms to awake. Then, as if realizing: "He's dead!" she cried in a loud, horrified whisper. "Husband, he's dead. Our boy's dead."

"Yes, Margot, he's dead."

"And look . . . Oh my God! They've *killed* him. There's blood . . . blood all over his breast. My child! My innocent boy! What does it mean, Monsieur?"

But it was old Simeon who announced in a curious, hard voice: "They say, Mother, it was he who did the killing up at the White House."

"It's a lie! A foul lie!" Then she turned to de Marsac: "He didn't. You know he didn't. You know he's innocent."

De Marsac made no reply.

Slowly she raised herself up. She seemed possessed with a sudden idea, an idea that half stunned her, half swept her on. There was that same slow certitude in her movements, and her eyes were dilated with unutterable fear.

"Yes, you *know* he didn't do it," she said to de Marsac in a hoarse and horrified whisper. "You know Lucien wouldn't have harmed a fly. *It was the demon that was put into him.* And who put that demon there? It was *you*, you with your Evil Eye. . . . Yes, just as you put it on us all. But that's past now. Your power is over. The spell is broken, and I tell you before everyone, my boy is innocent, innocent as a babe unborn."

"What does she mean?" cried de Marsac in amazement. "She's mad! mad!"

Then it was old Simeon who spoke.

"No, she's not mad," he shouted. "You are the black devil who made him do it. You . . . You . . . You . . ."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DUEL OF THE EYES

“What does it all mean?” said Peter, breaking a prolonged pause.

With a wide gesture of helplessness, de Marsac threw out his hands. “I do not know,—unless they are both mad. Fantastic, is it not? Such an accusation! Demons! Evil eyes! Do we live in the age of wizardry? I trust you will try to forget a scene that must have been as painful to you as it has been a profound shock to me. Poor people!”

With a look of pitying wonder he regarded his domestics. Old Margot had thrown an arm over the body of Lucien and her head had fallen on his chest. With one arm round her, old Simeon supported her.

“I don’t know what has gotten into them,” went on de Marsac with pained perplexity. “All I can think is that grief has played havoc with their reason. To-morrow when their mood is calmer they will be sorry for this outburst. They seem to be suffering from the strangest delusion.”

He paused; then, folding his arms, he surveyed them broodingly. “Or else (though I hate to think such a thing) they must know more of this affair than they care to acknowledge, and so throw on me this monstrous suspicion. That is conceivable, though I shrink from the thought that they would try to save themselves by implicating me. It all goes to show that the whole ghastly business must be probed to its uttermost depths. No one is more eager to throw full light on the mystery than I am, and though I am crushed by misfortune, I mean to lend my whole remaining energy to its solution.”

“And good luck to you,” said Peter. “For my part I wash my hands of it. I’ve got Pascaline back and that’s all

I care about. To-morrow at dawn we'll be off for parts unknown. I wish you success, Monsieur, for I have an idea we will never see you again. . . . And now I think we'll be getting back to the house. Come, my dear."

"Yes, Uncle Peter," said Pascaline, clinging to him. "Please take me home."

De Marsac looked at them thoughtfully. Suddenly his manner changed.

"Before you go," he said quietly, "I have an announcement to make. But will you not return to the library for a moment? We shall be more comfortable there."

Peter hesitated. "Cannot your announcement be deferred?"

"No. It's rather important."

Peter looked at Spirelli who nodded. So they all followed de Marsac to the library.

They were evidently in one of the towers. All round them were shelves of books. There was a writing-table, a divan, tapestried walls, rugs on the floor. A snug den, lighted by an overhead lamp.

"Please sit down," begged de Marsac, offering them chairs.

But Peter shook his head obstinately. "No, we are in a hurry. Can't you make your announcement standing?"

"As you will," said de Marsac with a shrug. Then, in a grave and solemn voice, he addressed them.

"It is this . . . Broken though I am by misfortune, stormy though seems the future, Mademoiselle your niece has promised to marry me. The joy she withheld from me in my prosperity she now yields to me in my adversity."

Pascaline had her arms round Peter's neck, and her face was hidden on his chest. But at de Marsac's words she turned slowly. He was looking at her steadily, with a gaze of extraordinary intensity. Lights like little flames seemed to gleam in his dark-blue eyes. As if under a strong magnetic attraction, her own eyes rose to his, frightened but

unable to withdraw themselves. Then, in a firm, level voice, he addressed her:

"Is it not true, Pascaline? As soon as you divorce your present husband you have promised to be my wife."

But before she could answer Spirelli broke in: "Not if I can prevent it," he cried harshly.

It was as if some spell had been broken. Peter saw de Marsac's hands clench as he turned fiercely on Spirelli.

"And what have *you* to do with it?"

"Everything," quietly answered Spirelli. "'When she divorces her husband', you said. Well, I am that husband."

"*You!*"

"I, Monsieur."

Peter felt Pascaline tremble in his arms; de Marsac fascinated him at that moment. He had drawn himself up, his brows knitted, scornful amazement in his face. For a moment he stood there, rather splendid, like a creature of stone. Only the clenching and unclenching of his hands betrayed his emotion. He appeared to be examining Spirelli's announcement, playing the quick light of his intelligence on it. Then he gathered himself together. He seemed to accept it and when his voice came it was quiet, courteous.

"Of course, I should never have suspected it. It shows what fools we may all be at some time. But after all, it matters little. You, Monsieur, or another. She will divorce you. She will come to me."

Peter felt Pascaline cling to him with quick, twitching hands. Again de Marsac was addressing her.

"You will come to me, will you not, Pascaline? You love me and you will follow me where I ask?"

The girl did not reply, but Peter felt her agonized clutch. Again de Marsac spoke in clear, inexorable tones.

"By your silence you admit my claim. Then come . . . now. . . ."

An intense power seemed to emanate from him. His eyes,

focussed on her, were compelling flames. Peter felt her turn in his arms and, with a great pang, realized that she was slipping from him. He tried to hold her more tightly, but firmly she was releasing herself. Like a knife-thrust he *knew*. If once she went to this man he would lose her for ever. Frantically he now sought to hold her, but almost with a shudder she withdrew from his embrace. Then, with her eyes fixed on de Marsac, she made two steps towards him. . . . She paused. . . .

For Spirelli, too, had his gaze fixed on her, concentrating it with a dark, profound intensity. His teeth were set, his brow knitted, and the whole force and passion of his being were centred in his eyes. They seemed to grow bigger, to dilate. In them was eager love, poignant appeal; and above all the strange seduction of the mesmerist.

To Peter who watched breathlessly, it seemed that a conflict was going on, a battle of wills, silent, intense, terrible. These two men were fighting with all the force of their beings for the possession of that frail girl. He quivered with a desire to intervene, but in the presence of such violent emotions he felt himself impotent. He could only throw his sympathy to the side of the man he wanted to win. With all his heart he hoped for Spirelli.

In an anxiety that choked him, he watched the girl. He saw her eyes tear themselves from those of de Marsac and stare for a moment in wild bewilderment. Then, slowly, as if drawn by a magnet, she turned to Spirelli. Still slowly step by step, she moved to him. His arms went round her, and the next moment she was sobbing on his breast.

"It is shameful," blurted out Peter. "Ah! my poor little girl! To treat her so!"

"Yes," said Spirelli with the air of a man exhausted. "I shrank from it, but there was nothing else. She was torn between us. Now she has made her choice, for ever. She is mine. She will never leave me."

Then, mastering his emotion, he turned to de Marsac.

"Monsieur, you hypnotized her in this room a little while ago. You thought by suggestion to obtain the ultimate control over her. But I, too, have mastery."

"I grant it," said de Marsac with a shrug. "I am beaten. But I still believe my power is greater than yours. It has never failed me before. Perhaps it was because you had love fighting on your side. That is the greatest power of all. I congratulate you, Monsieur, and bow my head before defeat. You need not marry this charming girl, because she is already your wife, but you will love and be happy together."

He surveyed them with a charming smile: "Now that I am resigned to my fate," he went on, "I can give you my sympathy and good wishes. I foresee a home, domestic felicity, children . . ."

Decidedly he was a game loser. He always seemed to command the situation. Peter never admired de Marsac so much as then. But he started, for the man was addressing him directly.

"And you too, Monsieur, I congratulate you. By your thought-power thrown against me, you helped to defeat me. How could I struggle against two minds with love thrown in? I only hope the agonizing experience you have gone through will not have a detrimental effect on your heart."

"Thanks awfully," said Peter. "I'm perfectly all right. Funny! my heart seems to thrive on agonizing experiences. It never felt so fit."

"You are what is known as a 'false cardiac.' I only wish my hopes of longevity were as good as yours. To live to be old one should believe one is about to die."

"Perhaps you're right," said Peter. "Perhaps the big doctor was a bit of a fraud. And now we must be going."

"Wait just a little longer. I will never see you again, and before you go I want to tell you the story of my life. It's a strange one. You will not regret having heard it."

Once more Peter looked at Spirelli, and again Spirelli

nodded. De Marsac's manner was disarming, but one never knew. As they sat down, Spirelli's hand stole to his hip. De Marsac saw the action and laughed.

"Ah! my friend, you are suspicious. Well, I don't blame you. But I assure there is nothing to fear. I am not one of those desperate villains who keep a powder magazine under their floors. I have no melodramatic tricks up my sleeve. I really bear you no ill will, even though you have beaten me. You see, I am quite frank."

"I, too, will be frank," said Spirelli. "I don't trust you. There's too much to explain. I'm going to listen to what you say, but I'm listening with my hand on my pistol."

"And I too," said Peter.

"So much the better. It will be all the more piquant telling my story under the levelled muzzles of your automatics. But I abhor violence of any kind. Though you may entertain some suspicion to the contrary, I swear to you I have never been violent in my life. Also, I have never taken any part in those atrocious crimes. No jury could convict me of wrong-doing. In the eyes of the world I am an entirely innocent man. And now, whether you believe it or not, perhaps you will listen to me patiently.

Spirelli and Peter nodded. Then, standing up with his back to the fire-place, under the focus of three pairs of eyes and the aim of two brownings, de Marsac began.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DE MARSAC EXPLAINS

"When I say I am entirely innocent, you will note I make the reservation: 'In the eyes of the world.'

"Six crimes have been committed and I have taken no active part in them. Again note, I say: 'active.' Physically I have lifted my hand against no one, and in any court of the

land I would be adjudged innocent. These are the material facts of the case. Legally I am guiltless. Morally—I am one of the greatest villains unhung.

“Six crimes have been committed, I say, and I have been the moving spirit in each. When the mad Abbé in court compared me to Gilles de Rais, he was nearer the truth than he knew. From fools and fanatics often come forth truths that wise men cannot see. The Abbé was a monomaniac, but when he detected in me a resemblance to the great Gilles, he was not wrong. Even physically I resemble him. And why should it be strange? Let me tell you this: I am a direct descendant of Gilles of Brittany.

“Perhaps in an old family some ancestor of powerful genius may be able to re-embody himself, so that his life may be lived afresh in that of one of his descendants. This idea is not merely fanciful, it has a scientific basis. For good or evil we are all the inheritors of our fore-fathers. The virtues that moved them, the passions that maddened them, are our virtues, our passions. We are the creatures of heredity,—not of half a score, but of a thousand dim ancestors who have transmitted to us according to their strength those characters that they in turn inherited. And so we may go back to the ape, the wolf, the saurian.

“This great hereditary host, I say, lives in all of us, saints and assassins, priests and prostitutes. We are at their mercy, their slaves to be damned or deified. Only their very number saves us. The good balances the bad, and the normal is achieved. Environment has played its part. The leaven of love is ever regenerating the race. Yet, once in a while, Nature achieves a ‘freak’—one who is so emphatically good or bad that he is able to influence for better or worse, many or one of those who spring from him.

“I believe that I am such a one. The traits of my great ancestor have been in part transmitted to me. Just as I am the lineal descendant of Gilles of Brittany, so also am I his modern prototype. If he was one of the

greatest monsters of history, potentially at least, I am one of the greatest monsters of the present age."

De Marsac paused. He was speaking calmly and easily, with those smooth phrases that sounded so musical in his rich voice. His striking face, like that of an actor of tragic rôles, contributed to the effect. He was holding them under a spell. Even as they listened their hands loosened on their pistols. De Marsac, as if conscious of his power, went on:

"I fear to bore you with my theories, but you will see from what I have told you why I have come to consider myself the re-incarnation of that demoniac being—with this important difference, though, that while his iniquities were physical, mine were mental. While his crimes were cruel and mediæval, mine were refined and modern. His violences were of the body, mine of the spirit. Particularly was I interested in his devil worship, indeed in perverse passions of every kind. I became a student of strange aberrations, of masochism, of flagellism, of the mysterious links between man and the beast. Even the Abbé Grégoire, with all his unholy erudition could sit at my feet and learn . . . You will excuse me a moment if I smoke a cigarette."

He took one from a glittering case and lighted it. Then he resumed:

"And now I will tell you another thing. The house in which you have been living belonged to our family. We sold it only thirty years ago. As a boy I remember my father showing my brother and myself the underground passage. He conducted us through it, warning us never to tell anyone of its existence. I have not been in it since, but boyish fear and imagination have made me remember it in every detail. On Lucien, feeble-minded though he was, it must have made a similar impression. And this brings us to my brother.

"Lucien was always what is called 'lacking.' We were, as you know, twins, but I the elder seemed to have the brains of both. It was as if I had stolen his share of intelligence.

At school I had success after success, while he stayed at home and played with childish toys. I was acclaimed a prodigy, while every year he grew more hopelessly an idiot. He could not be taught to read, but he learned to knit and hour after hour he would spend peacefully like that. Yet though so deficient mentally, physically he became bigger and stronger than I. On the whole, however, we were alike in face and figure; but while I grew in knowledge, he remained a harmless child.

“That is the point—harmless. He had a kindness, a respect for life that was almost exaggerated. He would not knowingly have tread on a worm. He adored animals; seemed to have an understanding of them that few sane people attain to. But his strongest affection was lavished on me. He worshipped me. He would do anything I told him, no matter how wrong it was. So, bit by bit, I came to take advantage of his adoration for me.

“I told him to steal, and he pilfered. I told him to destroy, and he smashed and ruined. Lastly I told him to *kill*. It was only a field mouse, I remember, but . . . he hesitated. Then I exerted all my force of will. Shuddering, he crushed the pretty creature.

“That was the beginning. Every day I exercised my will on him, getting him more and more under control; then, at last, my crowning triumph, I made him kill his dog. It was pure fiendishness on my part, that cruelty that makes boys tear the legs and wings from flies. I made him slay his pet dog.

“All these acts were put down to insane savagery on his part, for I compelled him to deny that I had ever suggested them. Yet sometimes I thought my father was suspicious of me, and I became more careful. Then, one day I made a great discovery. I did not need to *tell* him to do things: by merely wishing in my mind I could *make* him do them.

“This may seem extraordinary, but it must be remembered that we were twins, and there was an affinity between us that

does not exist between ordinary brothers. That discovery was a revelation to me. I could not believe it at first; but after several experiences, increasingly difficult, I convinced myself that I possessed a terrible power over the mind and body of my idiot brother.

“The thought excited me, almost terrified me. Lucien was my instrument for good or evil. He was a tool in my hands, and if he had only been sane I could have used him to advantage. But here he was caged in the grounds of the château as if he were in an asylum.

“At sixteen the desire to do evil was as strong in me as in other lads is the desire to do good. Through Lucien I could do evil without lifting a hand and without the shadow of suspicion falling on me. Yet opportunities for doing evil in the grounds of the château were limited, and for a while I let the matter drop.

“Then one time on a visit home I made another discovery. Even as I could control him by my presence, so also I could control him in my absence. I could dominate him from a distance just as well as close by. It was frightfully interesting. This new discovery excited me more than the first. My father had said: ‘It’s funny that the boy is only bad when Hector is at home.’ ‘I’ll show them,’ I said. In Paris at my studies I would concentrate all my faculties, willing, willing with all my force that Lucien would do such and such a thing. In the very next letter from home my father would bitterly lament that my brother had done that very thing. I confined my willing to minor acts of no grave evil; but I knew that in small or great things my power was the same.”

Again de Marsac paused. There was a decanter of water and a glass on the mantelpiece behind him. He poured out a little and sipped it.

“By your faces I see that all this is painful to you, so I will hurry on. After a little I came to try my strange power on others with varying degrees of success—on a jury, on

the prisoner at the bar, even on the judge. It was intensely interesting to me. In every way I tried to develop my gift of human mastery. I found I could dominate certain people by command of speech, others merely by mental suggestion; but none could I dominate from a distance as I could Lucien. He was the *chef-d'œuvre* of my art, my supreme victim. I knew he was mine when I wanted him, so for a moment I left him alone.

“And now to come to Angèle Ragon. Angèle was my mistress. There was no great harm in that, but I wanted it kept dark partly for family reasons, and partly from fear of her old father who, I knew, would have killed me. Over Angèle too I had a wonderful ascendancy. Well, as most men do of their mistresses, I tired of her finally. I tried to get rid of her, but she clung to me. It was, as they say, *la glue*. On a visit home she followed me. I was afraid she would betray me, so I asked her to meet me by night in the courtyard of Le Gildo castle. There we had a violent scene. She was very desperate. She said she was tired of life and threatened to end it.”

De Marsac lit another cigarette and continued:

“Angèle Ragon *did* die that night. She died by her own hand. She killed herself by forcing her hat-pin into her heart. But what she did was done by my mental suggestion. True, the wish was already there, but behind it was all the force of my will. I said good-bye to her for the last time. I left her there heart-broken among the ruins, but I only went a little way. Unseen by her I *willed* that she should kill herself. And she did. I saw her fall over and, coming out from my hiding-place, I found her dead. I hid the body. The following night I buried her.

“It was I who frustrated the Abbé Grégoire in his efforts to dig among the ruins. I did not care how many victims of Gilles de Rais he discovered, but I did not want him to discover the remains of Angèle Ragon.

“You see, I am explaining everything, and I hope you be-

lieve me. Yet if I were to make this confession to an officer of the law, he would refuse to arrest me. And no court in the land would condemn me. Indeed, perhaps they would put *me* in an asylum for the insane in place of Lucien. The speculation amuses me. Ah! I can see by your faces you think it is fantastic. But I assure you I am not accusing myself out of fantasy. Although Angèle Ragon died by her own hand I was her murderer just as much as if I had actually stabbed her. To doubt this would be to doubt the greatness of my gift of which I am so proud.

“And now to come to the other crimes. I planned them all in detail, I carried them out . . . through my unfortunate brother. You think this is incredible, but I tell you proudly I did it. Aye, sitting alone in my study in Paris, I did it. Or even in the midst of a crowd I projected my will to Lucien. I impelled him to the deed. The death of Angèle Ragon had whetted my appetite for blood. I wanted to kill, even as my great ancestor killed, out of mere wantonness. And also to test my wonderful power, I sent my thought to Lucien. I made him enter the house by the secret passage. The rest was easy.

“The first two crimes were characterized by mere savage ferocity; then there entered into it the element of fantasy, the grim idea of the werewolf. The sadistic strain in me craved expression. I, who revolted in fastidious horror from an actual deed of crime, found satisfaction in a vicarious one. I, who shrank from eating a raw beef-steak . . . well, I would make my brother *eat living human flesh*. I can conceive of nothing more horrible than this. I had achieved the absolute of horror, a masterpiece of the macabre. Even my great ancestor would have applauded me. . . .

“I see on your faces a look of doubt. Perhaps you think that I am mad and that all this is the raving of a lunatic. I can assure you that I, too, am a man of science, an experimentalist. I developed the werewolf idea. I even went the length of fabricating a costume in which my brother could

masquerade. He was as pleased with it as a child. The only trouble was that he used to steal away sometimes on his own account. That was the great flaw in my scheme. Towards the last I could not entirely control him. He entered too much into the spirit of the game. Old Simeon and Margot did their best to watch him, but it was not always easy; for between his violent attacks, which were now becoming more and more frequent, he was quite gentle, even lovable, and seemed to have no memory of what he had done. When an attack was coming on, he became wonderfully cunning and often used to evade them. They must have suspected him of the murders, but it showed a marvellous divination on their part to connect me with them. In time, however, I came to dominate them too, so that though I believe they suffered a hell of fear and guilt, their lips were obstinately sealed.

“I think I have made you see everything clearly. On the five occasions my brother took life at Castel Blanc it was I who impelled him. I am the real murderer. On all other occasions he acted on his own impulses, inspired no doubt by the memory of his more deadly excursions. Had he submitted to my control alone, he would never have met his death, and I could have gone on and on. That was my ambition—to kill and kill, and yet not lift my hand in violence. Instead of six people I might have slain six hundred like my notorious ancestor. . . .

“I do not think I have left anything unexplained. I did not, of course, ‘will’ the abduction. That would have been too dangerous. There Lucien acted of his own accord, and all I could do was pray that Mademoiselle might be unharmed. I really loved her. I would have done anything to gain her, and there my first weakness showed itself. . .

“Now I have lost her I consider I have lost all. I do not care any longer. With her to aid me, I might yet have become a great, and even a good man. Who knows! I believe we can slough our evil natures. The body suffers an en-

tire change every seven years: why not the soul? A man is as he lives and acts. Is it not so? Well, I do not care now. I have finished . . .”

De Marsac turned and held the glass of water in his hand.

“Into this glass I have dissolved a powder from my cigarette case, a powder which is a subtle but certain poison. After you have gone I will lay me down on that couch and go to sleep. And I will awake *never*. . . .

“Do not believe that in all I have told you I am suffering from hallucination, that I am a madman. I am the real murderer, not my brother Lucien. . . .

“Again I wish you every happiness . . . And now I’m tired, terribly tired. . . . Here I drink the Cup of Death . . .”

Then, raising the glass to his lips, with a last brilliant smile, de Marsac bid them adieu.

THE END

